

# EMOTIONAL ROLLER COASTER ALONG THE CUSTOMER JOURNEY

A narrative approach to consumer-brand relationship development

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### Abstract

In recent years, the role of consumer emotions has found foothold in the marketing domain and grown into a globally acknowledged phenomenon. Consumers have expanded their customer journeys fast-paced by being always online and always connected, and the number of elements competing for their attention has detonated. In the race of winning consumers over, brands endeavor to be meaningful in their eyes. As consumers perceive brands similarly to other people, building a genuine relationship and an emotional connection with consumers offers means to successfully tackle this hurdle.

The purpose of this study is to understand how consumers discern their emotional connections with brands evolve through different experiences over time along the customer journey. More specifically, it offers insights from consumers' personal perspective on customer journeys and touch points consumers find meaningful. Furthermore, this study takes the research of consumer-brand relationships to a novel context in Finland and explores it through a narrative perspective.

The research answers the question "*What kind of narratives consumers use to describe their emotional relationship journeys with brands?*" Chosen research method is a qualitative narrative study. The data was collected via 12 narrative interviews in the capital area of Finland and the interviews were conducted until the scientific saturation point was reached. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data set.

The findings of the study indicate, that seven new categories of how consumers construe their customer journeys with brands can be identified: (1) Taking it slow, (2) Love at first sight, (3) Growing to love, (4) Trusted partner, (5) Through thick and thin, (6) Fading love, and (7) Sudden fall. All the journeys identified from the narratives represent a unique path of emotional connection variance formed through touch points.

The findings provide a novel review from consumers' subjective perspective on consumer-brand relationship development and new-found insights on consumers' assumptions about the experiences shaping these relationships. As characteristic for narrative studies, providing a generalizable theory was not an objective of the study and these findings should be reviewed as viewpoints from individuals' narratives. This study highlights the importance of acknowledging and understanding the consumer viewpoint, and results in diverse managerial implications for marketing managers both in Finland and abroad. In addition, the study offers fruitful possibilities and suggestions for future research among this interesting and timely topic area.

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**Keywords** consumer-brand relationship, emotional connection, customer experience, customer journey, touch point, narrative research

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### **Tiivistelmä**

Kuluttajien tunteiden rooli on viime vuosina kasvanut markkinoinnin kentässä ja noussut globaalisti tunnistetuksi ilmiöksi. Kuluttajat ovat laajentaneet asiakaspolkujaan nopeatempoisesti olemalla jatkuvasti ”online”, ja samanaikaisesti kuluttajien huomiosta kilpailee yhä useampi taho. Kilpaillessaan kuluttajien suosioista brändit pyrkivät olemaan kuluttajien silmissä merkityksellisiä. Koska kuluttajat kokevat brändien olevan ihmistenkaltaisia suhdekumppaneita, mahdollistaa aidon suhteen rakentaminen ja tunnetason yhteyden luominen kuluttajien kanssa haasteeseen vastaamisen.

Tutkielman tarkoitus on ymmärtää, kuinka kuluttajat jäsentävät tunneyhteytensä brändeihin muuttuvan ajan mittaan erilaisten kokemusten kautta asiakaspolun aikana. Tutkielma tarjoaa näkemyksiä asiakaspoluista ja kuluttajille merkityksellisistä kosketuspisteistä kuluttajien näkökulmasta. Tutkielma vie kuluttaja-brändisuhteiden tutkimuksen uuteen kontekstiin Suomessa ja lähestyy aihetta narratiivisesta perspektiivistä.

Tutkielma pyrkii vastaamaan kysymykseen ”Millaisia narratiiveja kuluttajat käyttävät kuvaillessaan tunteellisia suhdepolkujaan brändien kanssa?” Valittu tutkimusmetodi on kvalitatiivinen narratiivitutkimus. Data kerättiin 12 narratiivihaastattelun avulla pääkaupunkiseudulla Suomessa ja haastatteluja toteutettiin, kunnes tieteellinen saturaatiopiste saavutettiin. Data analysoitiin temaat-tisen analyysin avulla.

Tutkielman tulokset osoittavat, että seitsemän uutta kategoriaa kuinka kuluttajat jäsentävät asiakaspolkujaan brändien kanssa voidaan tunnistaa: (1) Edetä rauhassa, (2) Rakkautta ensisilmäyksellä, (3) Kasvaa rakastamaan, (4) Luotettu kumppani, (5) Ylä- ja alamäessä, (6) Hiipuva rakkaus ja (7) Äkkikuolema. Kaikki narratiiveista tunnistetut polut edustavat ainutlaatuisia matkoja, joissa kuluttajan tunneyhteys brändiin muokkautuu kosketuspisteiden kautta.

Tulokset tarjoavat tuoreen katsauksen kuluttaja-brändisuhteiden kehitykseen kuluttajanäkökulmasta ja uusia näkökulmia kuluttajien käsityksiin suhdetta muokkaavista kokemuksista. Kuten narratiivitutkimuksille on luonteenomaista, tutkielman tavoitteena ei ollut yleistettävän teorian luominen ja tulokset tulee nähdä yksittäisten kuluttajien näkökulmina. Tutkielma korostaa kuluttajien näkökulman ymmärtämisen tärkeyttä ja tarjoaa useita suosituksia markkinointipäätäjille niin Suomessa kuin ulkomailla. Lisäksi, tutkielma tarjoaa monipuolisia mahdollisuuksia ja ehdotuksia tämän ajankohtaisen ja mielenkiintoisen aiheen jatkotutkimuksille.

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**Avainsanat** kuluttaja-brändisuhde, tunneyhteys, asiakaskokemus, asiakaspolku, kosketuspiste, narratiivitutkimus

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Across times emotions have played a fundamental role in the development of people as individuals as well as in a societal level. The driving force behind emotional development are relationships – partnerships between persons as well as people's bonds with possessions (Mugge, Schifferstein, & Schoormans, 2010), and non-materialistic constructs such as brands (Straker & Wrigler, 2016; Thomson, MacInnis, & Park, 2005). What enables the emotional-level relationship to form between people and brands, is that people see brands very similarly to other people – noteworthy and participative members of the relationship (Fournier, 1998).

While brands earlier focused on gaining new customers, today the focus is on nurturing the existing relationships and taking care of the brand's customers (Smit, Bronner, & Tolboom, 2007). A consumer-brand relationship results from regular interactions (Fournier, 1998; Thomson & Johnson, 2006) and all these interactions can be referred as touch points, indirect or direct consumer-brand occasions (Baxendale et al., 2015). While the growth of an emotional bond through interactions between consumers and brands requires time, the connection is not a static construct even once established, but evolves within time through encounters (Fournier, 1998), otherwise touch points. The relationship forms can vary from highly positive (e.g. brand love) (Batra, Ahuvia, & Bagozzi, 2012) to extremely negative (e.g. aversion) (Park, Eisingerich, & Park, 2013), and thus, the evolution of the consumer-brand connection along the customer journey generates an interesting and diverse area of research.

Today, focusing on the emotional connections between people and brands has grown in popularity, as the whole new age of always connected but rarely engaged has emerged (Kjaer, 2018). Marketing Science Institution (2016, p. 10) acknowledged the phenomenon in their publication by stating that one of the current themes waiting to be discussed is “What is the science of emotion in the digital, mobile, always on, and always connected age?” For consumers there are more choices available than ever and the number of elements fighting to get their attention and to connect with them has exploded. The phenomenon is interesting as it basically resonates with people around the world as many use a smartphone on a daily

basis and have access to products and services around the world real time via online stores. Thus, the time of “here and now” consumers has emerged and it has become a norm to constantly compare alternatives and pick the cherries on top (Bolton, Gustafsson, McColl-Kennedy, Sirianni, & Tse, 2014). Even though the selection of products and services is extensive, people are becoming global citizens and their relationships with possessions is changing from ownership to e.g. use-value (Bardhi, Eckhardt, & Arnould, 2012) and search for experiences, as the contemporary customers do not anymore perceive themselves buying the actual products or services but have replaced them with buying “the wonderful and emotional experiences” (Morrison & Crane, 2007, p. 410).

So how to tackle the challenge of being meaningful in the eyes of the customer in the content-crowded society? According to Fournier (1998, p. 367) “consumers do not choose brands, they choose lives”. That is, people use brands as a medium for achieving what they are after in their life in the bigger picture. When focusing on this notion, brands have the possibility to become one of the meaningful relationship partners in their customers’ lives, and touch points and high-quality customer experiences along the customer journey are the building blocks for this emotional bond. Through an association of human-like characteristics and manners to a brand (Alvarez & Fournier, 2016), consumers view brands similar to other people (Puzakova, Kwak, & Rocereto, 2013) and hence enable a profound and emotional-level consumer-brand relationship to form. If a brand succeeds in harnessing the touch points along the customer journey into an opportunity to connect on a deeper, more meaningful way with its customers, it opens doors to being genuinely relevant for the customer and stand out from the competition.

While brands have no control over their competitors’ actions, they do have the power to take action and focus on their own presence – and making it more relatable and human. As consumer-brand interactions are the driving force behind relationship development and these encounters are in practice touch points creating customer experiences, is Grewal, Roggeveen, Sisodia, and Nordfält's (2017, p. 55) statement that customer experience can be improved by “engaging with customers at three, hierarchical engagement levels: outstanding customer experience, emotional connection, and shared identity” quintessential. Thus, this research is interested in the second level of enhancing the customer experience: *connecting with customers on an emotional level*.

## 1.1 Research objectives

The aim of this research is to study through a narrative approach how consumers construe their emotional connection with a brand evolves through experiences over time along the customer journey. Consumers build relationships with brands that have many human-like characteristics and these relationships are not stable – they evolve through lived experiences, continuous interactions, and felt emotions (Fournier 1998). Even though emotional consumer-brand relationships exist, people acquire that level relationship only with certain brands (Thomson, MacInnis, & Park, 2005). Thus, another objective of this study is to identify the subjective experiences building the emotional connection and making it both durable and fluid in time, as well as understand the consumer-brand relationship forms.

When combining emotional relationships with customer journeys, an interesting and also a very natural combination is established. Customer experiences have been studied from a variety of different perspectives, as well as consumer-brand relationships, but the research around the alteration of that relationship within time through experienced touch points is quite an unexplored area of interest. How do consumers experience their consumer-brand relationship lives along these experiences and what kind of characteristics they describe the change-making touch points to have? Reviewing the emotional consumer-brand connection in the light of narratives from lived experiences in the age of “always connected but rarely engaged” offers a new fairway for insights in the marketing and branding domain. Going below the surface with consumers – to the emotional level – has been a topic of interest in recent years and it is something that both parties, consumers and their brands, have a lot to learn from.

This study perceives to expand the scope of consumer-brand emotional connection research by studying the growing trend of acknowledging consumer emotions in marketing management that has not received a lot of academic attention so far. A key objective for the study is to offer insights on the topic and raise awareness and interest among scholars and practitioners in the field.

Practical implications of this study will guide marketing and brand managers to recognize, develop and manage consumers’ emotional connections with their brand and work as a starting point for strategy work utilizing sentimental assets. The purpose of the study from a



managerial perspective is to provide an opportunity for brands to understand their customers better and provide insights on how consumers personally structure their relationships with brands and understand the critical touch points shaping the relationships. The information gained from the study can help with brands' customer experience management, creating an emotional connection with their customers by providing remarkable customer experiences and thus, strengthening the relationship with the customer, and making long-life customer journeys.

## 1.2 Research problem

Arnould, Price, and Moisio (2006) emphasize the importance of contexts as they are in a fundamental role in creating and trying out different theories. In this research the phenomenon is looked through the context of Finnish consumers. The focus will be on brands from different industries and both product and service providers will be included. The goal of the research is to offer novel insights to the field of emotional connection in the customer journey and to discover the possible variation of an emotional connection within time between a customer and a brand through different experiences along the customer journey.

Many researchers have touched the topic of consumer-brand relationships' human-like characteristics (Fournier, 1998; Kervyn, Fiske, & Malone, 2012; Thomson, Whelan, & Johnson, 2012), but according to Alvarez and Fournier (2016) the consumer-brand relationship requires further attention in order to gain understanding of whether consumers identify themselves with brands similarly they do with other people. The importance of acknowledging the role of emotions in business is not just a popular topic in the marketing research or a gut feeling, but the effect reflects to the bottom line as well, as "on a lifetime value basis, emotionally connected customers are more than twice as valuable as highly satisfied customers" (Zorfas & Leemon, 2016, p. 4).

In Marketing Science Institution's (2016) publication the delivery of integrated, real-time and relevant customer experiences was highlighted as one of the key focus points requiring attention in the upcoming years. When digging deeper into the world of customer experiences they (2016, p. 10) also stated that the "role of emotions in experience", and

designing “experiences that lead to maximal enjoyment, happiness and utility” are waiting to be discussed more. Some studies combining the fields of emotional connections and customer experience have been conducted (e.g. Grewal et al., 2017) where the link between customers identifying themselves with the values of the brand and creating a positive emotional connection has been discovered. From a consumer-brand relationship point of view Fournier (1998) has studied relationships in a brand-level and stated that the research in that field is scarce and these relationships in the context of consumers and brands have been most approached through brand loyalty theories. Lemon and Verhoef (2016) state that the understanding behind the drivers and constructs influencing customer experiences is fairly low. In their paper (2016, p. 85) they discuss about an area waiting to receive academic attention: “How do specific elements of the customer experience (e.g. sensory, affective, cognitive) combine to influence the customer at different points in the journey?”

As mentioned, the discussion around the topic is fairly small and it is stated that future research is required for an in-depth understanding on how consumers gain emotional connections with companies (Grewal et al. 2017). As audiences are almost spoiled with well-curated and accurately targeted content as well as with the possibility to choose what they want to experience, they have also become more demanding in terms of to whom they decide to give their time to. In the end, being relevant for anyone is a result of a long-term relationship and requires a lot of hard work especially in human-to-human relationships. While consumer-brand relationships can be observed through emotional, sensory, and cognitive aspects, this research is interested in discovering the nuances and unique insights of the emotional consumer-brand bond evolvement through touch points leading to customer experiences along their customer journeys.

The research aims to answer the question: “*What kind of narratives consumers use to describe their emotional relationship journeys with brands?*”

### 1.3 Key concepts

In this section the key concepts of the research are being presented briefly. More in-depth descriptions are provided in the following two chapters as a part of the theoretical framework.

*Consumer-brand relationship* concept addresses consumer's relationships with brands from the perspective that consumers can build relationships with brands similarly as they do with other people and this relationship is built on three fundamental elements: "first, the bond between consumer and brand, second, the brand as relationship partner, and third, the consumer as relationship partner" (Fournier, 1998; Alvarez & Fournier, 2016, p. 129).

*Emotional relationship* refers to a state of emotional connection that goes beyond positive feelings, featuring a feeling of attachment comprising of affection, passion and connection, and experiencing an intuitive sense of common fit (Batra, Ahuvia, & Bagozzi, 2012; Thomson et al., 2005).

*Consumer-brand bond* aims to conceptualize and measure the durability of the connections between consumers and brands (Alvarez & Fournier, 2016).

*Brand attachment* is defined as "the strength of the bond connecting the brand with the self" (Park, Macinnis, Priester, Eisingerich, & Iacobucci, 2010, p. 2).

*Brand relationship quality (BRQ)* can be used in defining the grade, intensity, and strength of consumer-brand relationship and it consists of four emotional dimensions: (1) Passionate attachment, (2) love, (3) self-concept connection, and (4) nostalgic connection, and three behavioral dimensions: (1) personal commitment, (2) partner quality, and (3) intimacy (Fournier, 1998; Hwang & Kandampully, 2012; Smit et al., 2007).

*Customer experience* is a holistic construct that includes "customer's cognitive, affective, emotional, social, and sensorial responses to the firm" along the consumer's journey (Bolton, Gustafsson, McColl-Kennedy, Sirianni, & Tse, 2014, p. 253; Klaus, Edvardsson, Keiningham, & Gruber, 2014; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Verhoef et al., 2009; Schmitt, 1999).

*Customer experience management (CEM)* is a business strategy, that aims to create an exchange of value between the brand and the customer where both parties receive a maximal benefit (Eguchi, 2013; Grewal, Levy, & Kumar, 2009).

*Customer journey* refers to the customer's total path throughout the purchase process that consists of a range of different touch points (Baxendale, Macdonald, & Wilson, 2015; de Haan, Wiesel, & Pauwels, 2016; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

*Touch point* is an indirect or direct encounter between the customer and a brand, and they can be categorized through e.g. ownership, media type or channel (Baxendale, Macdonald, & Wilson, 2015; Stephen & Galak, 2012; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

#### 1.4 Structure of the thesis

The structure of the study is divided into seven sections as follows. First, the background of the research, the research problem and objectives, and the key concepts of the research are being explained. In the second and third chapters the theoretical background for the study is built through an extensive literature review. The second chapter will focus on presenting the concept of emotional connection between consumers and brands. The third chapter will provide a historical perspective, present the existing definitions, and discuss the current state of customer journey, customer experience, and customer experience management.

The literature review is followed by presenting the methodology, which will introduce the data collection, methods, and the trustworthiness of the study followed by data analysis and findings. Finally, the key findings and contributions of the research reflected with the research problem in terms of scientific research and practice are discussed. To conclude, the limitations of the study and ideas for further research are presented.

## 2 EMOTIONAL CONSUMER-BRAND CONNECTION

In the following chapter the first part of the theoretical background of the research is reviewed in order to foreground and background the chosen phenomenon of consumers' emotional connections with brands. The theoretical underpinnings, current state, and future trends and forecasts will be studied and later used when interpreting the data and drawing conclusions. As the study exploits narratives to understand how consumers construe their emotional connections with brands and how in their perspective these relationships evolve through experiences over time along the customer journey, it is not to offer a generalizable theory to be compared directly with the notions of the following literature review, but offer fruitful insights on the topic through personal and unique storylines.

### 2.1 Definition of emotions

Emotions have been researched across different fields, but there has not emerged any commonly accepted definition (Izard, 2007). According to Havlena and Holbrook (1986) the most used typologies in consumer literature are psychology research's two typologies defining and categorizing emotions: *dimensions* and *categories*. The dimensional approach sees emotions "in terms of continuous underlying dimensions that distinguish among states", whereas in the category-based approach all emotions are developed from a limited amount of fundamental emotions (Havlena & Holbrook, 1986, p. 398).

In their paper Havlena and Holbrook (1986) refer to Mehrabian and Russell's (1974) theory on three-dimensional PAD paradigm. Mehrabian and Russell (1974, p. 396) identify "(1) pleasure, (2) arousal, and (3) dominance" as the three dimensions of response. On the approach utilizing categories Havlena and Holbrook (1986) present Plutchik's (1980) eight categories of basic emotions. Plutchik (1980) defines emotions as overriding reactions that have a background in evolutionarily fundamental processes (Havlena & Holbrook, 1986). Plutchik's eight basic emotions Havlena and Holbrook cited (1980, p. 396) are "(1) fear, (2) anger, (3) joy, (4) sadness, (5) acceptance, (6) disgust, (7) expectancy, and (8) surprise." Another early ones identifying emotions based on categories was Izard (1977), whose approach has been referred fairly widely among marketers (Machleit & Eroglu, 2000). Izard (1977) classified emotions into ten core emotions: interest, delight, surprise, distress, hate,

aversion, derision, fear, shame, and guilt. Later on, Izard (2007) adjusted his definition on fundamental emotions and presented “interest, joy/happiness, sadness, anger, disgust, and fear” as basic emotions.

Havlena and Holbrook’s (1986) compared these two different typologies in terms of emotional character of consumption experiences. Results of their study indicated that Mehrabian and Russell’s (1974) three-dimensional approach provides more extensive insights of emotional responses in consumer experiences than basic emotions.

## 2.2 Emotional consumer-brand connections

Consumers and their attitudes towards brands have been in the interest of researchers for decades. Within the recent years emotions have gained an increasing attention in the field of marketing and consumer behavior (Vredeveld, 2018). It makes sense, as emotional attachment is not only something people can have with other people, but also with possessions (Ball & Tasaki, 1992; Mugge, Schifferstein, & Schoormans, 2010) and brands (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Smit, Bronner, & Tolboom, 2007; Straker & Wrigler, 2016; Thomson, MacInnis, & Park, 2005). In 1998 Fournier offered a new perspective to consumer research by introducing the concept of consumer-brand relationship, where consumers can build relationships with brands similarly as they do with their peers, and her paper has worked as a conceptual foundation for research within that field (Park et al., 2013).

According to Alvarez and Fournier (2016, p. 126) consumer-brand relationship is built on three fundamental elements: “first, the bond between consumer and brand, second, the brand as relationship partner, and third, the consumer as relationship partner”. In the following chapters, these elements will be discussed in depth.

### 2.2.1 Consumer-brand bond

The consumer-brand bond aims to conceptualize and measure the durability of the connections between consumers and brands (Alvarez & Fournier, 2016). Brand attachment is a focal construct in consumer-brand bonds as it is defined as “the strength of the bond connecting the brand with the self” (Park, Macinnis, Priester, Eisingerich, & Iacobucci, 2010, p. 2). People naturally exploit brands when building and expressing their concepts of

self (Chaplin & John, 2005), and thus the personal-level contribution is enhancing the consumer-brand relationship when the self-brand connection is strong and the brand is reflecting or promoting consumer's perceptions of him/herself (Fournier, 1998; Park et al., 2010). Additional models related to brand relationships are for instance Fournier's (1998) multi-faceted brand relationship quality (BRQ), defining the grade, intensity, and strength of the relationship, and Batra, Ahuvia, and Bagozzi's (2012) brand love, that is a higher construct over brand attachment containing behaviors driven e.g. passion.

Even though consumer-brand relationships are commonly observed through a positive perspective, recently the range of relationships has been broadened to include also relationships below neutral state and the scale varies from attachment to aversion (AA model) (Park et al., 2013). As consumers' goals for expressing their identities are limited to identifying, differentiating, and assimilating the self (Chernev, Hamilton, & Gal, 2014) and possibly restricted relational skills (Alvarez & Fournier, 2016), a real attachment is built only with a fraction of the brands people interact with (Thomson, MacInnis, & Park, 2005).

When the bond is strong with these specific brands, the relationship has also some downsides (Alvarez & Fournier, 2016). When the relationship is strong, also all the negative reactions escalate and become more long-term when being compared to consumers with a weak bond (Grégoire, Tripp, & Legoux, 2009), and might be extremely harmful in nature varying "from complaining to third parties, to negative word of mouth, to illegal actions such as theft, threats, and vandalism" (Johnson, Matear, & Thomson, 2011). In the face of the consumer-brand relationship coming to an end (*in the context of their study, the end of the relationship refers to the extent where consumer has stopped using the brand*), the consumers perceived as probably the most profitable and active spokesperson become possibly the most malicious ones (Thomson, Whelan, & Johnson, 2012). When consumers feel betrayed by the brand, a love-becomes-hate effect takes action and it is unlikely to win these consumers back anymore as their grudge-holding and desire for avoidance and revenge are high after the failure (Grégoire et al., 2009). Notably, despite well-established consumers are likely to resist acts of reimbursement (Grégoire et al., 2009), their will for forgiveness is high as they have a lot at stake such as the gained and expected upcoming benefits (Joireman, Grégoire, & Tripp, 2016).

Researchers have identified different consumer-brand bond constructs. In exchange relationships both consumers and brands are “concerned with how much they receive for what they give” and they are characterized by quid pro quo exchanges (Aggarwal, 2004, p. 89). Instead, in communal relationships the other party is prioritizing the needs and providing benefits for the partner in the relationship (Aggarwal, 2004). Fournier (1998, p. 361) has identified seven dimensions for consumer-brand relationships: “voluntary (deliberately chosen) versus imposed, positive versus negative, intense versus superficial (casual), enduring (long-term) versus short-term, public versus private, formal (role- or task-related) versus informal (personal), and symmetric versus asymmetric.” From these dimensions a wide range of relationship forms emerges varying from positively oriented relationships (e.g. friendships) to convenience (e.g. marriages of convenience) and nonvoluntary unions (e.g. enslavements) (Fournier, 1998). As described by Hazan and Shaver (1987, p. 515), in an adult relationship context the outcome of an attachment in relationship varies from “secure lovers” experiencing feelings of faith, joy, and friendship to “anxious” attachment characterized by “emotional highs and lows, and jealousy”. When contemplating the consumer-brand relationship range, Alvarez and Fournier (2016, p. 131) identify four dimensions representing it: “first, valence (positive–negative); second, intensity (strong–weak); third, arousal/ passion; and fourth, equality (equal status–unequal status).”

### 2.2.2 Brand as a relationship partner

The fundamental element backgrounding brand relationship is Fournier’s (1998) outlook on brands as active partners in the consumer-brand relationship instead of just being passive targets for purchases. In their paper Alvarez and Fournier (2016) refer to Harding’s (2015) publication on brands and note that when the extent how much a brand cares for them is meaningful for the consumer, they perceive the brand as an active member of the relationship and do their part through purchases. What is interesting, is that consumers personify brands and their relationships with brands are surprisingly human-like and people conceive brands similarly to other people (Kervyn, Fiske & Malone, 2012; Thomson, Whelan & Johnson, 2012). As people naturally favor someone with whom they have shared traits with (Hwang & Kandampully, 2012), it is understandable they tend to prefer also brands they have some qualities in common with (Fournier, 1998; Sirgy, 1982) and according to Alvarez and Fournier (2016) not all brands are as likely to turn into consumer-brand partners.



The consumer-brand partnership is powered by a brand personality, a form of brand association where the customer is creating a perception of the brand's human-like characteristics based on its actions, which enables the relationship to formulate and develop (Fournier 1998). When personifying brands consumers discern brands through dimensions of warmth and competence (Aaker, Vohs, & Mogilner, 2010; Kervyn, Chan, Malone, Korpusik, & Ybarra, 2014) and these associations stimulate varying emotional reactions, for example, brands with high levels of perceived warmth and competence evoke adoration, while brands with high on competency and coldness evoke jealousy (Kervyn et al., 2012). Warmth in particular is an association that generates emotional responses (Alvarez & Fournier, 2016), as consumers show stricter responses to disasters when they have a negative influence on brand's warmth when being compared to scandals harming brand's perceived competence level (Kervyn et al., 2014).

When discussing human-like approach to brands, a next-level construct from brand personification is brand anthropomorphism, that attaches actual human manners to brands (e.g., Coca-Cola aims to delight me) instead of only attributing human characteristics to brands (e.g., Coca-Cola is an honest brand) (Alvarez & Fournier, 2016). As consumers view humanized brands much like other people, these brands are perceived also as morally worthy and valuable and thus, their actions are often viewed as intentionally conducted (Puzakova et al., 2013), leading to perceived judgement and reviews of fairness due to e.g. price revisions (Kwak, Puzakova, & Rocereto, 2015). Consumers include sociable personality to brands with human-like capabilities leading to social interactions that resemble human-to-human interactions (Aggarwal & McGill, 2012; Alvarez & Fournier, 2016).

When consumers are countering anthropomorphized brands they may unconsciously begin executing behaviors in line with the brand's image, especially when they conceive the brand as their partner co-operating with the them to reach their goals, whereas when the brand is viewed more as a servant, an unilateral operator doing the task for the consumer, these kind of behaviors to secure a good interaction with the partner are not needed (Aggarwal & McGill, 2012). Consumers' personal nature in terms of trust, has an effect on whom they prefer as delivering messages from brands – other human or “anthropomorphized agents”, such as products (Touré-Tillery & McGill, 2015, p. 94). According to Touré-Tillery and McGill (2015) consumers with low trust on people see anthropomorphized agents more

compelling as in their mind goodwill is missing from other people. Vice versa, consumers with high levels of interpersonal trust prefer other people as brand advocates over anthropomorphized agents (Touré-Tillery & McGill, 2015).

### 2.2.3 Consumer as a relationship partner

The reasons and methods for consumer-brand bonds to exist vary a lot between people (Alvarez & Fournier, 2016) and consumers have different tendencies to use in their eyes meaningful brands as a medium to self-portrayal (Sprott, Czellar, & Spangenberg, 2009). When discussing as simple factor as age, young people are more likely to build their relationship with brands based on concrete features such as the awareness or possession of a product, while getting older these relationships are based more on abstract notions and meanings like the brand's personality (Chaplin & John, 2005; Park, Eisingerich, & Park, 2013). Later in life adults begin to attach more importance on investing in and reaching emotionally meaningful goals, like feeling useful or gaining ultimate fulfilment (Carstensen, Fung, & Charles, 2003; Yoon, Cole, & Lee, 2009), while younger adults value knowledge-related goals, such as learning new things (Carstensen et al., 2003). Regardless of older consumers valuing emotional goals and experiences more, younger consumers are emotionally more receptive to sensory attractions (e.g. music or pictures) (Park et al., 2013). Additionally, older consumers are more flexible in terms of the quality of the bond (Park et al., 2013).

When discussing consumers as the relationship partner, in a central focus are consumers' different attachment styles that influence on consumer-brand bonds (Alvarez & Fournier, 2016) and predict the success of these bonds (Thomson & Johnson, 2006). The basic construct of an attachment style can be described through the dimensions of *avoidance* and *anxiety*, where the avoidance aspect includes how much people feel they can rely on and trust their relationship companions and how comfortable they are in intimate relationships, while the anxiety aspect is defined by the amount of concern people carry of being walked out on in relationships (Thomson & Johnson, 2006; Wei, Russell, Mallinckrodt, & Vogel, 2007; Whelan & Dawar, 2016).

Interestingly, brand attachment can be used as a compensation measure if consumers are not fulfilled by their interpersonal relationships (Thomson & Johnson, 2006; Thomson et al.,

2012) or require support through matter to their insecurities (Rindfleisch, Burroughs, & Wong, 2009). Despite consumers are perceiving brands as human-like relationship partners in many ways, consumers with both “fearful style (high anxiety, high avoidance)” as well as “secure style (low anxiety, low avoidance)” of attachment do not blame brands in situations of crisis, even though this could be the case in their personal relationships (Whelan & Dawar, 2016, p. 287). In another attachment style consumers leverage brands to communicating their positive characteristics and qualities to other people and thus, help to improve their interpersonal bonds (Swaminathan, Stilley, & Ahluwalia, 2009). Despite similarity is important when assessing the brand personality and its effect on the consumer-brand relationship, consumers with high levels of anxiety in relationships are still looking for something extra in brands such as excitement (Swaminathan et al., 2009), and according to Smit et al. (2007) brands with a one-of-a-kind and interesting personality are perceived more easily relatable, whereas consumers with low avoidance prefer building relationships with sincere brands (Swaminathan et al., 2009).

### 2.3 Consumer-brand relationship characteristics

According to Hwang and Kandampully (2012) emotional aspects have a firm foothold in building a strong consumer-brand relationship. What is notable, is that emotions are by nature brief and temporary (Batra, Ahuvia, & Bagozzi, 2012), whereas a relationship is long-term and more complex construct including affective, behavioral, and conscious bonds (Fournier, 1998). Thus, by just evoking occasional emotions brands might not be able to build and maintain a durable connection with consumers, but a nurtured relationship can be resistant and long-lasting providing benefits for both parties.

According to Alvarez and Fournier (2016) resistant positive relationships are even more rare than assumed. When looking into the essence of emotion – a relationship – according to Fournier (1998) and Thomson and Johnson (2006) a regular interaction is required, which is supported by Levy and Hino (2016) stating the emotional connection between a brand and its customer is not gained overnight but gradually. The relationship is most likely to form when the brand is imbedded in the routines of the consumer and within time the bond takes a specific form (Fournier, 1998).

Creating an emotional connection requires the brand to appeal their customers on a personal level. According to Kemp, Fillapalli, and Becerra (2014) an emotional connection and a consumer-brand relationship can be established, when a brand manages to create meanings and unique experiences. After all, brands can be seen as depositories for meanings consumers employ in their lives (Fournier, 1998). When a brand manages to “reach beyond the purely rational and purely economic level to spark feelings of closeness, affection and trust” with their audience, they have reached the point of emotional connection, which indeed is one of the characteristics of an exceptionally great brand (Berry, 2000, p. 134). When a brand is creating a bond replicating the characteristics of friendship, such as trust, humor, and honesty, it taps right into consumers’ basic needs. According to Bolton et al. (2014, p. 268) consumers are most importantly “people with needs”. When planning to connect with consumers through their emotions and feelings, addressing their core needs is a fundamental way to gain their attention and build the relationship. According to Maslow’s (1943, p. 394) Hierarchy of Needs, people have five basic needs that they are looking to fulfil which are called “physiological, safety, love, esteem, and self-actualization”. When aiming for meaningful encounters, why not focus on the qualities meaningful for the target group?

Today’s business environment is heavily scattered into different channels, but one thing has remained the same – all interaction is still done in some kind of environment, whether it is an online or offline environment. What is notable is that people’s response to their immediate environments is emotional (Machleit & Eroglu, 2000). According to Machleit and Eroglu (2000) the scale of emotions experienced is extensive and the emotions vary depending on the retail environment in question. Even though consumers are capable of making rational decisions, people also base their choices on their emotions (Schmitt, 1999). According to Havlena & Holbrook (1986) subjective emotional advantages are a driver for a consumer to behave congenially or being after hedonic experiences as often consumption leads to a greater amount of emotional responses than concrete gains.

#### 2.4 Brand-relationship quality

In terms of strategic marketing planning, looking inside out has shifted into looking outside in – to the consumers worldview. People are desiring to be loved and have a sense of belonging and are expecting brands to give a response. Consumer-brand relationships are

equivalent to human-to-human relationship also in terms of repeated two-way exchanges (Hwang & Kandampully, 2012), that offer a series of perquisites for both parties (Smit et al., 2007). When discussing about consumer-brand relationships, Fournier's (1998) construct of brand relationship quality (BRQ) stresses the significance of the grade of the relationship and addresses the issue through a diverse six-faceted model which is broadly accepted among scholars (Hwang & Kandampully, 2012). In the BRQ model Fournier (1998, p. 363) proposes that the customer-brand relationship is built on different qualities described as "affective and socioemotive attachments (love/passion and self-connection), behavioral ties (interdependence and commitment), and supportive cognitive beliefs (intimacy and brand partner quality)".

Smit et al. (2007) reanalyzed Fournier's (1998) BRQ construct and divided the facets of the model into emotional dimensions and behavioral/informational dimensions. (1) Passionate attachment, (2) love, (3) self-connection, and (4) nostalgic connection were identified as the four emotional dimensions, and personal commitment, brand-partner quality, and intimacy as the three behavioral dimensions (Smit et al., 2007). As the current study focuses on emotional consumer-brand connections, the emotional dimensions of the BRQ model are being presented more in depth:

*Passionate attachment* to a brand has its roots in Bowlby's (1979) attachment theory and in the context of consumer-brand relationship the amount of attachment a consumer has to a brand is linked to the commitment degree and readiness for concessions in the relationship (Hwang & Kandampully, 2012). Passionate attachment facet reflects the extent to which the brand is adapted into the consumers everyday life and the attachment is so strong that in situations when the brand is not applied the consumer is experiencing that something is lacking (Fournier, 1998; Smit et al., 2007).

*Love* refers to the actual feelings consumer has for the brand (Smit et al., 2007) that can be described somewhat similarly as interpersonal feelings, e.g. passion (Sternberg, 1986). In consumer research a concept of *brand love* has arisen, in which the positive emotional connection to specific brands is high (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Fournier, 1998). Batra et al. (2012, p. 1) outline central elements of brand love: "self-brand integration, passion-driven behaviors, positive emotional connection, long-term relationship, positive overall attitude

valence, attitude certainty and confidence (strength), and anticipated separation distress.” According to Bolton et al. (2014, p. 266) emotional sensations like “attachment, love, feelings of belonging, warmth, nurturing, happiness and well-being” are highly valuable for consumers when combined with strong customer participation. Notably, according to Fournier (1998) in order the connection between the brand and the customer to be sustainable in the long run, more than just positive emotions are needed.

In *self-concept connection* consumer is experiencing a high personal-level connection with the brand and feels the brand is communicating the key features of his/her identity, values, and objectives (Fournier, 1998). The urge to construct self and self-express is fundamental for human nature and it can be done via symbols such as items from selected brands and this is partly affecting consumers’ purchase decisions (Belk, 1988; Hwang & Kandampully, 2012). According to Hwang & Kandampully (2012) emotional features in consumer-brand relationship can more extensively be found within hedonic goods consumed i.e. luxury purposes when being compared with functional products and services, while Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) suggest that consumers regard more passionately with hedonic brands that deliver well in symbolic advantages.

*Nostalgic connection* refers to brands being integrated into the consumers previous experiences and personal history (Smit et al., 2007).

## 2.5 Outcomes of emotional consumer-brand connection

Emotions are a motivational factor for consumers to choose a specific product or service and connect with it (Levy & Hino, 2016) also in the long run, as emotional connection is a predictor for loyalty (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006), commitment, and investment readiness (e.g. for paying higher price) (Thomson, MacInnis & Park, 2005). The assumption is supported also by Liu-Thompkins and Tam (2013) as they state that repetitive purchases are not only resulting of habit, but also of positive brand-related reactions. When consumers are passionate about a brand and are experiencing so called brand love, they are likely to speak well of the brand in terms of positive word-of-mouth advocacy (Batra et al., 2012; Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006).

According to Park et al. (2010) consumer-brand relationship's final outcome is brand attachment. According to Park, Macinnis, Priester, Eisingerich, and Iacobucci (2010) a positive connection antedates readiness to make personal sacrifices in order to retain the brand relationship. The stronger the relationship is, the more willing consumers are to carry out challenging behaviors such as "investments of time, money, energy, and reputation" for the brand (Park et al., 2010, p. 14). A high-quality consumer-brand relationship is also linked to purchase behaviors and to a higher brand purchase share (Park et al., 2010). When the consumer is not having only rational-based relationship with a brand, but also connects with it on an emotional level, the brand has gained a competitive advantage as emotionally engaged consumers are more likely to be resistant to competitors' efforts due to their durable attitudes (Kemp et al., 2014). When a brand has managed to become a medium for the consumer to express him/herself i.e. consumer is experiencing self-connection, the consumer is more likely to assess the brand in a favorable manner (Fournier, 1998) and even resist negative information (Batra et al., 2012; Swaminathan, Page, & Gürhan-Canli, 2007).

Grewal et al. (2017) have shown that if building on foundations of consciousness, it is possible for the customer to relate to the higher mission and values of the retailer or service provider and this way affirmative connections with the customer can be achieved. As consumers are building their identity through the meanings associated with brands (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998), the possibility to identify with a brand on a higher level provides the foundations for consumption. Grewal et al. (2017) note that the connection can build up to be even so powerful, that customers can identify with the retailer. Levy and Hino (2016) state that emotions are one of the factors motivating customers to end up using as well as engaging with a certain brand and these emotions are building up between the brand and the consumers within time. Social media has made it possible for brands to have an open discussion and an ongoing interplay with their customers which is interesting to reflect to the feelings of e.g. closeness and trust.

### 3 CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE AND THE CUSTOMER JOURNEY

This chapter introduces the central definitions of customer journey and customer experience and provides an extensive literature review on the topics.

#### 3.1 Definition of a customer experience

Despite the wide attention customer experiences have received in the academic field, there is no straightforward view on the definition of customer experience. This study focuses on the widely accepted definitions, which will be presented next.

Abbott (1955, p. 39) discussed about human needs and stated that “what people really desire are not products but satisfying experiences”. One of the first ones emphasizing the importance of customer experiences was Schmitt (1999, p. 53) who recognized five different sorts of experiences: “sensory experiences (sense); affective experiences (feel); creative cognitive experiences (think); physical experiences, behaviors and lifestyles (act); and social-identity experiences that result from relating to a reference group or culture (relate)”. In Schmitt’s (1999, p. 53) multidimensional framework consumers are seen as “rational and emotional human beings” who are interested in having enjoyable experiences instead of just being focused on the functionalities of products and services.

According to Verhoef et al. (2009) and Lemon and Verhoef (2016) customer experience concept is a dynamic process that at its best contains five types of replies to the retailer: the cognitive dimension that is about the mental capabilities to e.g. process information, the affective dimension including the attitudinal responses, the emotional dimension that is built around the customer’s feelings and emotions, the social dimension that is affecting on customer’s behavior, and the physical dimension that is about actions e.g. body language. Puccinelli et al. (2009, p. 15) discuss customer experience through consumer behavior and suggest that there are seven areas of consumer behavior affecting customer experiences: “(1) goals, schema, and information processing, (2) memory, (3) involvement, (4) attitudes, (5) affect, (6) atmospherics, and (7) consumer attributions and choices”.



A conceptualization many researchers have accepted, is the holistic nature of customer experience (Bolton et al., 2014; Morrison & Crane, 2007; McColl-Kennedy et al., 2015; Verhoef et al., 2009). All kinds of service encounters create a customer experience (Schmitt, Brakus, & Zarantonello, 2015) and the experience may be linked to certain aspects of the encounter (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016) like brand (Brakus, Schmitt, & Zarantonello, 2009) or self-service technologies (Verhoef et al., 2009). A comprehensive experience is a combination of separate elements, such as offers, marketing communications, technologies, and partners, that would not be meaningful by themselves but together format a complete experience (Bolton et al., 2014).

Brakus, Schmitt, and Zarantonello (2009, p. 52–53) conceptualized brand experience as “subjective, internal consumer responses (sensations, feelings, and cognitions) and behavioural responses evoked by brand-related stimuli”, and demonstrated that a brand experience can consist of four separate dimensions including “sensory, affective, intellectual, and behavioural” dimensions. Due to the subjective nature of customer experiences, the same environment or action may lead to very different emotions and perceptions among different customers and their goals (Puccinelli et al., 2009). According to Grewal, Levy, and Kumar (2009) customer experience includes all the contact points where customer is interacting with the company, its goods, or services. In their paper Grewal et al. (2009, p. 1) are presenting that a retail customer experience is constructed by firm-controlled factors such as “promotion, price, merchandise, supply chain, and location”, and major macro factors. Also, Verhoef et al. (2009) and Lemon and Verhoef (2016) suggest that customer experience is a combination of both elements that the retailers has control over, such as selection and price, as well as things that the company cannot manage, such as customers having an effect on their peers or poor weather.

What is notable, is that customer experience is not formed only by the peak touch points, but the little things are the ones making a large difference and are a way to differentiate from the competitors (Bolton et al., 2014; Grewal et al., 2009). Details such as a single emotion, a small gesture of an employee or consistent communication are important as they are directly comparable with competitors, and thus can make the product or a service to stand out positively (Bolton et al., 2014; Grewal et al., 2009).

Customer experiences are creating value to companies in multiple ways through some key outcomes such as customer satisfaction (Brakus, Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2009), loyalty (e.g. customer lifetime value, recalling) (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016), financial measures (e.g. turnover, profitability), and immaterial possessions (e.g. brand and consumer equity) (Gentile et al., 2007). According to Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) when the relationship and commitment is strong the customer is not only loyal but also an advocate promoting the company to others. But harnessing fans into loyal brand champions, even though consumers have the possibility to gain huge audiences themselves due to social media, is not a simple mission as customers need to identify themselves with the brand in order to become an advocate (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003).

### 3.1.1 Customer experience management

Today's changing global markets are forcing also marketing scene to revamp itself and thus, customer experience management (CEM) is according to Homburg, Jozić, and Kuehnl (2017) one of the most auspicious management methods. As unique and delightful experiences can be leveraged into a way of differentiating from the competition, their design and management should be in a key role in strategic decision making (Bolton et al., 2014; Klaus et al., 2014). Homburg, Jozić, and Kuehnl (2017, p. 384) define customer experience management as a management approach and conceptualize it around three key categories: "a firm's (1) cultural mindsets, (2) strategic directions, and (3) capabilities." Even though the current world praises scalable innovations, in customer experiences it is all about customization. Importantly, the management and creation of experiences needs to be addressed "before, during and after the service encounter" i.e. in all stages of the experience (Morrison & Crane, 2007, p. 419).

Today especially the retail environment is known for being heavily omni-channelled (Alexander, Teller, & Roggeveen, 2016; Verhoef, Kannan, & Inman, 2015) and extremely competitive resulting that especially "brick-and-mortar retailers increasingly compete on the basis of the customer experience they can deliver" (Alexander, Teller, & Roggeveen, 2016, p. 6031). The amount of online and offline touch points in the omni-channel retail environment has become significant (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016) and thus, consumers are nowadays exposed to brands and communication clutter in different environments and from different perspectives constantly. As the product and service offering is extensive, survival

requires more than competitive pricing and unique selection (Grewal et al., 2009; Berry, Carbone, & Haeckel, 2002) and thus, more companies are aiming to create profound, meaningful and durable experiences with a life-time perspective with their customers (Bolton et al., 2014). Survival in the omni-channel retail world requires synergetic omni-channel management, where different touch points are controlled to ensure an optimal experience and performance over different channels (Verhoef et al., 2015).

Bolton et al. (2014) identify three dimensions of enhancing experiences that are focusing on making the small details count. First, they (2014, p. 264) emphasize the importance of having a “human touch” that is focusing on encountering consumers as emotional and needy human beings. This helps to build foundations for a lasting brand-consumer relationship as the interactions are as authentic and meaningful as possible (Bolton et al., 2014). Second approach Bolton et al. (2014) suggest is to focus on creating emotionally powerful experience. The emotional engagement can be created through experiences focusing on senses such as encouraging to try the product or customizing experiences to match consumers’ hidden urges (Bolton et al., 2014). Bolton et al. (2014) present as their third dimension a combination of the two previous so that the experiences include human-to-human interaction as well as the emotional engagement, which can be enabled by consumer co-creation possibilities.

### 3.2 Customer journey

According to Berry, Carbone, and Haeckel (2002), in order for a company to succeed in providing high-quality experiences, a customer experience management strategy is required. Importantly, they emphasize the fact that a strategy requires foundations from the understanding of the customer journey. As discussed earlier, customer experience is a multidimensional construct that takes multiple customer responses into account and these responses occur in different touch points throughout the purchase process i.e. customer journey (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

According to Lemon and Verhoef (2016) the purpose behind studying customer journey is that it helps to understand the possible routes the customer might choose or end up taking during the process from consideration all the way to postpurchase activities. As presented

by Verhoef et al. (2009) the customer experience evolves over time, meaning that previous experiences effect on upcoming experiences.

According to Verhoef et al. (2009, p. 32) the total customer experience includes “the search, purchase, consumption, and after-sale phase of the experience, and may involve multiple retail channels.” This means, that customers’ experiences are forming over time through multiple touch points along the customer’s journey starting from prepurchase activities to the actual purchase and finally the postpurchase (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Similarly, Puccinelli et al. (2009, p. 16) are proposing that customer experience can be conceptualized along a five-stage consumer decision process including “the need recognition, information search, evaluation, purchase, and postpurchase stages”. Thus, the customer experience is more dependent on the whole process instead of just e.g. the outcome (Yang, Mao, & Peracchio, 2012).

When reviewing the customer journey based on Lemon and Verhoef’s (2016) three-stage model, the first stage is *prepurchase*, which covers all consumer interaction with the company prior to an actual transaction activity (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). According Lemon and Verhoef (2016), the prepurchase stage includes behaviors like noticing a need for something, information seeking, and forethought. *Purchase*, the second stage on the journey, includes all interplay between the consumer and the company during the actual purchase event and is typically defined by behaviors like decision making, making an order, and paying for the product or service (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). The final stage along the journey, *postpurchase*, comprises all customer interactions with the company, its environment, and the product or service after the purchase has been done and includes behaviors like “usage and consumption, postpurchase engagement, and service requests” (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, p. 76). Lemon and Verhoef (2016) state that the postpurchase stage is where the actual product or service becomes critical, whereas in the previous stages the touch points are not that attached to the qualities of the product itself. According to their paper it is also notable, that the final stage has no time limit: the postpurchase stage can cover ultimately the rest of the customer’s life.

### 3.2.1 Types of touch points in the customer journey

A customer journey is built around a range of different touch points (Baxendale, Macdonald, & Wilson, 2015; de Haan, Wiesel, & Pauwels, 2016; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016), and a touch point is an indirect or direct encounter between the customer and a brand (Baxendale et al., 2015).

The classification of the customer experience touch points varies in different studies (e.g. ownership, media type, channel). Lemon and Verhoef (2016, p. 76) group touch points into four types based on ownership: “brand-owned, partner-owned, customer-owned, and social/external/independent”. *Brand-owned touch points* are in their paper described as touch points generated, managed, and ruled by the brand. They state that these touch points contain all media (e.g. webpages, commercials) that the company owns as well as components of the marketing mix (e.g. service, product qualities) that the company has control over. *Partner-owned touch points* are engineered, managed, or ruled collaboratively by the brand and its associates (e.g. communication agencies, distributors) (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). *Customer-owned touch points* are in their paper described as acts influencing the customer experience initiated by the customer and they are fully outside the control of the company (e.g. choosing to pay with a credit card). Finally, *social/external touch points* are not generated by the company nor the customer, but they still have a strong effect on the customer experience “(e.g. other customers, peer influences, independent information sources, environments)” (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, p. 78).

Stephen and Galak (2012, p. 625) classify customer touch points by media type and present a three-domain categorization of “paid, owned, and earned media”. Stephen and Galak (2012, p. 625) describe *paid media* as activities or touch points that are “generated by the company or its agents” (e.g. advertising in external channels, e-mails and sponsoring). *Owned media* is in Stephen and Galak’s (2012, p. 625) paper referred as activities or touch points directly “generated by the company or its agents in channels it controls” (e.g. in-store advertising, company’s online store, company’s social media channels). Stephen and Galak (2012) state *earned media* to be activities or touch points that are only indirectly generated by the company and are controlled by third-parties (e.g. online reviews, media articles, word-of-mouth). Similarly, in Baxendale, Macdonald, and Wilson’s (2015, p. 235) study of touch points’ impact on brand consideration they identify six categories of touch points based on

media types: “brand advertising, retailer advertising, in-store communications, word-of-mouth, peer observation (seeing other customers), and traditional earned media such as editorial”.

The raise of digital media and new mobile channels are fundamentally changing the way consumers search information and decide on brands (Puhlmann, 2013; Verhoef et al., 2015). Puhlmann (2013) is classifying touch points based on their channel by dividing them into online, offline, and mobile touch points. According to Puhlmann (2013) over 80 percent of brand-consumer interactions contain both online and offline touch points, and Lemon and Verhoef (2016) discuss how customers are not facing different touch points in any specific order as each stage of the customer journey can include even all types of touch points. As the online and offline touch points are merging into an omni-channel network of touch points, it offers companies a possibility to provide integrated experiences by harnessing different channels to interact with each other (e.g. mobile devices, in-store visual merchandising, smart phone applications) (Verhoef et al., 2015).

Lemon and Verhoef (2016, p. 76) have summarized customer journey and customer experience into a continuous process, where all stages of the journey are interrelated and include different types of touch points, that are not all controlled by the company (“brand-owned, partner-owned, customer-owned, social/external/independent”). The model is describing the customer journey as a complex process that evolves within time and takes also previous and future experiences into account and makes them dependent of each other as previous experiences are playing a significant role in determining the future experiences (Ghoshal, Yorkston, Nunes, & Boatwright, 2014; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Verhoef et al., 2009). As the customer journey is a set of interactions influencing one another, Chen and Rao (2002) note that the chronological order of positive and negative touch points is effecting consumers retrospective assessments. According to Bolton et al. (2014) it is notable, that customer experience is a continuously evolving process that should grow consistently along with the customer without becoming stable and routine-like.

According to Ghoshal, Yorkston, Nunes, and Boatwright (2014) reviewing touch points along a customer journey is a fruitful approach as it enables the company to not only manage

touch points comprehensively but also to manage and identify the most crucial touch points more conveniently.

### 3.3 Emotions in customer experience and customer journey

Living high-quality customer experiences can increase the consumer's emotional bond with the company (Gentile, Spiller, & Noci, 2007). When building a durable customer relationship, it is crucial to not only create meaningful encounters and experiences, but also reflect on what actions have managed to impact on customer's emotions (Bolton et al., 2014). Different emotions and moods (i.e. affect) are present in people's minds basically constantly and so called "neutral state" is infrequent (Puccinelli et al., 2009).

Managing and producing emotional customer experiences is intricate (Straker & Wrigley, 2016) and brands must be on guard constantly as according to Puccinelli et al. (2009) affect is having an effect on customers in multiple ways throughout their customer journey stages. They discuss that in stages where the customer is identifying the need and looking for information, affect might define the place where people go for shopping: when being tired and busy they are more likely to choose a well-known store, whereas in a positive humor they may choose a new place to visit and have more energy to explore the selection. During the evaluation stage an encounter enhancing positive affect has a positive impact on product assessments and in the purchase stage affect impacts on behaviors such as risk tolerance where the customer in a nervous mood might more likely choose a familiar product (Puccinelli et al., 2009).

### 3.4 Customer journey and customer experience current state

Creating high-quality customer experiences is today one of the top management objectives (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Verhoef et al., 2009; Berry, Carbone, & Haeckel, 2002). Technology has disrupted the retail landscape in a way that physical objects and online content have merged into an omni-channel environment (Brynjolfsson, Hu, & Rahman, 2013) where customers are interacting with companies through numerous touch points both online and offline (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Puhlmann, 2013). This change in consumer-brand interaction has made the customer journeys more extensive than ever and resulted in that companies are not able to control the customer experience and the customer journey the

same way anymore (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). As the business environment has become liquid in a way that new innovations and changes are a norm creating a new level of competitiveness, it creates a challenge for companies to keep up, adjust their methods and learn constantly (Straker & Wrigley, 2016). Managing experiences is not a simple task to succeed in as many services are provided in collaboration with partners making the whole experience formation highly complex (Bolton et al., 2014). An additional factor to the fall of control is that consumers are hand-picking the information they need and are increasingly turning towards touch points that the companies are not controlling directly (e.g. word of mouth, online assessments, peer reviews) (Puhlmann, 2013).

It is not only the interaction between a customer and a company that has been under a fundamental change in recent years. Also, the way customers communicate with each other – that is customer-to-customer (C2C) interactions – has changed dramatically offering companies both new opportunities and challenges (Libai et al., 2010). Customers are constantly connected and reachable through new media channels (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010; Straker & Wrigley, 2016) which means the experiences have become increasingly social and are influenced by peer consumers (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Good is no longer good enough – consumers are looking for exceptional experiences to share with others (Collier, Barnes, Abney, & Pelletier, 2018). The interaction between customers and companies has changed also in terms of value creation, as today it is not only the company passively operating and pushing content, but the customers have become co-creators (Vargo & Lusch, 2008).

Nowadays the omni-channel way of doing business is extremely competitive, and especially traditional retailers that do not operate online are competing based mainly on the customer experience they can provide (Alexander, Teller, & Roggerveen, 2016). As customer expectations have changed, companies are obliged to “develop, manage and monitor” the customer experiences they create (Klaus, Edvardsson, Keiningham, & Gruber, 2014, p. 203).



## 4 METHODOLOGY

In this section the chosen research approach is presented and justified. Additionally, the data-collection and data-analysis methods and concepts are gone through.

### 4.1 Methods

As “qualitative methods are most useful and powerful when they are used to discover how the respondent sees the world” (McCracken, 1988, p. 21), was qualitative research the chosen research approach for the study. Since this study aims to gain insights on how consumers subjectively discern their consumer-brand relationship development and the events effecting the nature of that relationship, is a narrative analysis suitable method as stories are richer, thicker, and give context when being compared to non-narrative ones (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008), consumers’ personal narratives can be used to interpret and understand their experiences (Thompson, Pollio, & Locander, 1994), and consumers universally understand the meanings of their experiences by placing them in a story (Escalas, 2004). Through the narrative approach a rich data is afforded as the interviewees can convey their individual experiences in their own words (Ruane & Wallace, 2013).

The nature of reality and its characteristics in this study are based on a constructionist ontology. The main focus was on the content of the empirical data, yet as the chosen position is interpretivism, also the language practices on how the content is being produced were acknowledged (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). Thus, it is presumed that multiple realities exist (Hudson & Ozanne, 1988) and that reality is understood as subjective, where it is based on perceptions and experiences that may vary among different persons and also change over time and context (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). As the experiences are tied with contexts such as location, date or previous experiences, the amount of realities is corresponding with the number of persons experiencing them (Hudson & Ozanne, 1988).

The purpose of the research is to understand and interpret consumers’ personal experiences and the consumer-brand relationship alteration through a holistic perspective, but not to offer one objective or generalizable truth as characteristic for narrative analysis (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). According to Hudson and Ozanne (1988) understanding is viewed as a

continuous process instead of a final result, as a researcher will never gain *the understanding*, only *an understanding* (Denzin, 1984). It is notable that this study does not aim to predict future events or experience, despite the interpretations done in the past impact the present interpretations, that again impact future interpretations (Hudson & Ozanne, 1988). It is also taken into account that while “language, customs, meanings, and culture are continuously being created by the joint activities of people” are individual meanings important to reckon along the shared meanings in order to provide a more comprehensive understanding (Hudson & Ozanne, 1988, p. 511). Emotional connections and relationships between consumers and brands are an interesting topic to study through the subjective narratives as each individual forms their own meanings and interpretations from similar activities and contexts. It suits well this project, as the purpose of the study is also to offer a widespread and unbiased overview on the different experiences and emotional meanings associated with brands.

#### 4.2 Data collection and analysis

This study draws significant inspiration from Fournier (1998). In her research Fournier (1998) studied consumer-brand relationships through consumers’ subjective meanings they attach to experiences and brands, and grouped consumers based on the intensity of their relationship with brands. Similarly, also this study explores consumers’ subjective conceptions, but the focus is on the evolvement of consumer-brand relationships from an emotional aspect and it groups consumers’ relationship journeys based on the evolvement of the emotional consumer-brand connection. Fournier’s (1998) study was conducted via three in-depth cases studies where the informant group consisted of three women in different conditions. Also, this study focuses on understanding the consumer-brand relationship forms and their development through individual meanings consumers themselves attach to their brand experiences, but through a narrative research approach, where via 12 interviewees the participant group is more diverse, and the brand stories are from today’s consumers’ perspective.

As interviews can be seen as one of the most trusted and efficient source of consumer data due to interviews’ interactive and flexible but still focused character (Arsel, 2017), it was a natural choice as the data collection method for the study. According to Escalas (2004), people usually use stories to read the meanings of their lived experiences and thus, the chosen method for the data collection was a narrative interview. Like characteristic for narrative

interview, the interviews were conducted without prior hypotheses and the interviewees were asked to openly tell stories without specific structured interview agenda (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008). Interviewees had the freedom of choice within the brands they would like to tell stories and thus, consumers' insights from both hedonic and non-hedonic products and services are included in the study.

The opening question for the interview was *“Would you tell about some meaningful brand experiences you have had and how your relationship with the brand has evolved within time?”* Apart from the opening question, there were no fixed questions. As it is recommendable to have a set of themes to explore in the interview (Arsel, 2017) in case the interviewees seemed like they are running out of stories, some key themes and questions were sketched that were brought up in a conversational style to keep up the storytelling when needed. In order to secure an unlimited flow of the narratives (Czarniawska, 2004) and being open for new ideas coming up during the interview (Arsel, 2017), the informants were allowed to set the course of the interview and even drift away from the main topic, whereupon spontaneous questions were asked by the interviewer when suitable. The use of “why” was avoided as Thompson and Locander (1989) state that such questions shift the focus of the interview away from describing the actual experience as it was into a more abstract level. The interviewees were asked to answer the question in a form of stories of their real-life events and emotions.

The data was collected via 12 narrative interviews and the interviews were conducted until the scientific saturation point was reached and there was nothing new emerging from the interviews in the eyes of the researcher. The study was conducted in the field, in an area where the participants actually spends time and thus, the interviews were held in Helsinki downtown and Espoo area. The interviews took approximately 30 minutes each and were held in the interviewees' native language Finnish. The interviews were recorded and already during the interviews some key observations were written down.

According to Elliott (2005) in Mishler's (1995) framework narrative analysis can be done via three different approaches. Firstly, the researcher can focus on the *meaning*, that is to be interested in the narrative's content and use a thematic analysis to understand the real experiences emerging from the narrative (Elliott, 2005). Secondly, the interest may be

towards the narrative's *structure*, in which the main focus is on how the narrative is being told (Elliott, 2005). Thirdly, the researcher can be primarily interested in the narrative's *performance*, meaning that the focus is on the interactional context's effect on the narratives (Elliott, 2005). The chosen model for data analysis of this research was thematic analysis and as mentioned earlier, the main emphasis is on the content of the narratives and what the interviewees said in their stories (Riessman, 1993; Riessman, 2004).

Thematic analysis was suitable for this research as it enables tracing shared thematic elements within the interviewees as well as the experiences they are telling about (Riessman, 2004). The themes were discovered through a narrative method based on grounded theory by creating concepts emerging from the data set via an inductive narrative analysis (Riessman, 2004). The thematic analysis was done by identifying, analyzing, and reporting themes emerging across the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In practice, already in the interviewing phase the analysis of the narratives was begun by writing down some emerging themes and observations, whereas the final outline of findings was formed through a comprehensive analysis of the data set as a whole.

The formal analysis started after the interviews, as the recordings were listened and transcribed into verbatim, that worked as a foundation for the in-depth analysis. The entire data set was gone through several times and all observations emerging from the narratives were identified and written down in free format. This was followed by summarizing the narratives into an Excel sheet and writing a synopsis of each of the 66 narratives. The compilation of narratives was systematically examined by looking for resemblances and patterns across the data set, identifying whether the narrative was about a strengthened, steady or weakened relationship and creating a suitable category for each narrative. All together seven key categories were identified and once all the narratives were gone through, the categories were further evaluated once again and named to reflect the narrative content of the category as typical as possible. As narratives require interpretation when used as data (Riessman, 1993), a special attention was paid to not only interpret data through personal viewpoint but also by keeping the theory actively involved in the interpretation and analyzing process. This meant that themes reflecting theory as well as themes without prior discussion were acknowledged.

### 4.3 Trustworthiness of the study

In order to conduct a transparent research, describing both the strengths and weaknesses of the study is crucial (Guba & Lincoln, 1985) and thus, the trustworthiness of the study is addressed through a variety of measures.

The interviewees were recruited through the personal network of the researcher, but all the interviewees were either half-acquaintances or previously fully unknown by the researcher, in order to decrease the possibility of a biased interview (Shenton, 2004). The honesty of the interviewees in order to hear their genuine thoughts and experiences without them having to worry about losing face (Shenton, 2004) was ensured by offering the participants an opportunity to refuse from the interview and the interviewees were consciously chosen outside of the researcher's personal circle of acquaintances in order to avoid the possibility that the relationship between the researcher and the interviewee would influence on what the interviewee chooses to tell in the interview. The interviewees were acquired through friends, family, and working place connections and to ensure a theoretical sampling the participants were a diverse group of consumers with varied sex, education, situation in life, profession, age, and consumption habits (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). All the interviewees were over 18 years old living in the capital area of Finland, and they received a similar amount of information about the study before the interview, that is that the study is about their meaningful experiences and brands. The interviews were conducted in areas familiar to the interviewees and in their preferred occasion to make the participants feel as comfortable and at ease as possible. Additionally, throughout the research project the study has been under scrutiny both by the thesis advisor as well as peer students in order to get objective feedback and perspectives (Shenton, 2004).

Like characteristic for a qualitative study, the findings are based on discoveries from a small group of consumers and the results are not straightforwardly generalizable into different situations (Shenton, 2004). Thus, the transferability of the research should be assessed case-specifically and note that the results have been interpreted in the context of Finland and Finnish consumers living in the capital area. The limitation has been taken into account in the research objectives and the study aims to offer novel insights on the topic. The dependability of the study is secured through the introduction and methodology sections which offer an in-depth description of the practices used when conducting to study in order

to enable future researchers to use the study as a benchmark or even repeat it as it is (Shenton, 2004). The reliability of the study is ensured through the use of several theoretical approaches. In order to make sure that the confirmability of the study is as high as possible and the findings represent the interviewees experiences and not the researcher's personal preferences (Shenton, 2004), the research method, findings, and conclusions are carefully justified and direct quotes are being presented in order to background and support the analysis for the reader.

## 5 DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

In the following section the key themes and findings of the study based on the narrative interviews will be presented and discussed. As the interviews were conducted in Finnish, the quotes presented have been translated into English.

The interviewees described their meaningful experiences and relationships with brands from different industries including both product and service-based brands operating in Finland and abroad. Their stories touched a variety of different consumer-brand relationship journeys. From lifelong partnerships to turbulent on-off relationships, and unexpected connections the interviewees had experienced all kinds of relationships with brands – some significantly more meaningful for them than others. As the interviewees were asked to tell about the meaningful brand experiences they have had and how their relationship with those brands has evolved within time, the majority of the stories were focusing on brands they had an exceptionally strong relationship with.

The experiences interviewees described to strengthen, undermine as well as finally terminate the consumer-brand relationship are playing a key role in understanding the evolvement of the emotional relationship along the customer journey. Based on the narratives, seven categories of relationship journeys were identified across the data set: (1) Taking it slow, (2) Love at first sight, (3) Growing to love, (4) Trusted partner, (5) Through thick and thin, (6) Fading love, and (7) Sudden fall. These categories were placed under three dimensions: *strengthened*, *lasting* and *weakened* relationship journey. Additionally, touch point elements the interviewees found shaping their consumer-brand relationships along the customer journeys were identified.

Table 1 provides an overview to the identified relationship journey categories. All 66 narratives emerged from the interviews are placed by interviewee and brand under the seven categories and an example synopsis is presented to illustrate the narratives each of the categories contain.

Table 1. A summary of the relationship journeys identified by the narrative analysis

Strengthened relationship journey			
	Taking it slow	Love at first sight	Growing to love
Narratives	Bettina and Balmuir and Foreo; Jami and Omega; Mikael and Genelec; Sara and Adidas; Tuomas and hotel in Stockholm	Bettina and Coach and hotel abroad; Cara and TAP Portugal and Furla; Jami and Patek Philippe; Mikael and Hilfiger and Superdry; Minna and HUS; Reetta and Elixia; Sara and Loavies; Tarja and Aqualan and detergent; Tuomas and Qatar Airways and Broadway & Sons	Jami and Barbershop; Mikael and Nike; Minna and OP bank and restaurant Krapihovi; Petra and Adidas; Sara and Marimekko
Example synopsis	Watch enthusiast Jami follows Omega via blogs, Instagram, and events. He was fascinated by Omega's Moonwatch story as the watch was made for NASA astronauts for a lunar mission. After graduating and getting his first job, Jami rewarded himself with the Omega watch he had dreamt about. The purchase experience in store was excellent and he described this first Omega watch being a milestone in life for him that strengthened the relationship and he started following Omega in different channels even more actively. Through his first purchase he felt he had kind of redeemed his place and doesn't feel hesitant anymore when visiting Omega stores.	Bettina was unfamiliar with Coach before she went to New York with her friends and family and visited their store. She felt like she was in Sex and the City when there were 5 women in store helping only them. It was something Bettina had never experienced before and it made her feel very luxurious as even she is particularly wealthy, they still helped her. Following the experience Bettina has bought several bags from Coach and has recommended the brand to others and gotten e.g. her mother to buying Coach bags as well. As she can't buy Coach from everywhere, not everyone has it and it's not as common as e.g. Louis Vuitton.	When Sara was young, she didn't really think much of Marimekko. Sara's family has had Marimekko products a lot at home and she got some Marimekko presents younger. Before she found them even embarrassing, but today values their design and products in a whole different way and has even bought e.g. the same tea pot her family has. Sara was not sure whether the change is due to a brand revamp or her growing up. Through social media Marimekko has gotten closer to consumers. As a Finn Sara is proud of Marimekko and when she lived abroad, she always praised it.
Lasting relationship journey			
	Trusted partner	Through thick and thin	
Narratives	Joonas and Salomon, Finnair, and Spotify; Mikael and Ford, Lapin Osuuspankki, Narvi, and Oras; Minna and Finnair; Petra and Finnair; Reetta and Foodin; Sara and H&M; Tarja and hometown restaurant; Tuomas and Nike	Bettina and Zara; Cara and Lumene, Dior, and Citymarket; Minna and VR and Lumene; Petra and Fitness24seven and Kesko; Sara and Lumene; Stina and Apple and Gymshark; Tuomas and Hugo Boss and Ralph Lauren	



Example synopsis	<p>Mikael and his family have always handled their banking in Lapin OP bank. He comes from a small town and has been familiar with the local bank, and even knows all the clerks and the manager so well, that they never ask his ID. Everything has always worked out smoothly and he has never given any negative feedback. Only once things have not gone as planned when he was taking mortgage as his personal bank advisor was on a holiday, so the case took longer than expected. He invited other banks to tender for his mortgage but decided to stay with OP even though their offer was more expensive than others. Today Mikael lives in Espoo but is still a customer of his hometown's OP as he wants to support the local bank and can handle everything remotely.</p>	<p>Lumene's powder has probably been the first powder Sara's mother has bought her when she was a teenager. She still uses the same product and couldn't think of buying any other brand. In general Sara wants to make the world a little better by doing small actions and has slowly started to change her beauty products into natural cosmetics. Sara told she thinks Lumene probably doesn't do animal testing and maybe some of their products are natural, but they are not exemplary or fully natural cosmetics. In the future she would like to have all her cosmetics only natural but finds the threshold to switch away from Lumene big as it has been with her daily for so long.</p>
<hr/>		
Weakened relationship journey		
<hr/>		
	Fading love	Sudden fall
Narratives	<p>Jami and Nokia; Joonas and Suunto; Mikael and Philips; Petra and Uudenkaupungin Golfklubi and H&amp;M; Stina and Louis Vuitton and Finnair; Tarja and Pay Channels</p>	<p>Bettina and Nordea and Haikon kartano; Cara and travel agency TUI; Jami and travel agency TUI, Minna and Danske bank; Tarja and Finlayson and refrigerator brand</p>
Example synopsis	<p>For a long time, Nokia was Jami's brand of choice. Since elementary school he had Nokia phones, but at some point tested Samsung through a recommendation. When Nokia did a new arrival by launching Lumia and marketed it with nice colors and fun music, Jami was very appealed by it. Also, the fact that it wasn't available in Finland made Lumia even more desirable for him. He ended up ordering Lumia from Germany and his several following phones were again Nokia. Problems came in when Apple and Android became stronger players and there wasn't as many apps available to Windows phones anymore and thus, his excitement for Nokia started to reduce. Today he doesn't take Nokia seriously as a phone manufacturer and is an Apple user.</p>	<p>Tarja had very happily bought a lot of Finlayson's products for years. She wanted to support Finnish work and had thought Finlayson's products are Finnish and made in Finland. Once when visiting their store, she had asked about some product's manufacturing and she had found out it was not made in Finland as it is so expensive to manufacture products here. This experience had brought Tarja a strong feeling that not all is how you think it is and there is more to the story in the background. Now her interest towards Finlayson's products has gone down and she considers a lot more whether she anymore buys anything from them.</p>

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## 5.1 Strengthened relationship

In their everyday lives consumers encounter multiple brands and have varied experiences in different touch points, that also serve as pitstops for the consumer-brand relationship evolvement. In terms of strengthening the relationship these encounters can work as fruitful foundations for the relationship to kick off at the first place, and to take restorative steps towards a stronger state. From the narratives three different categories for a buoyant relationship journey emerged. *Taking it slow*, where the relationship was consistently developing towards a stronger state, but in a more restrained manner over the long haul. *Love at first sight* includes journey narratives, where the relationship was non-existing or even rather negative but took a highly positive sudden change after a single powerful experience. *Growing to love* represents journeys where the consumers have either grown with the brand or used it for a longer time but did not feel the brand was special or even found it lame in the beginning of the relationship. Within time they had begun to fell for the brand and the relationship had built into a particularly strong one.

### 5.1.1 Taking it slow

The first category from the analysis of the narratives represents the relationship journeys that had a positive growth course as a whole, but the change was experienced to happen gradually over a rather long time frame.

In some cases, the interviewees had experienced that it took time to feel comfortable in the relationship and for the emotional connection to grow into a more secure and confident one. One of the interviewees described that after he had made his first purchase and become acquainted with the brand, he felt more comfortable with going to the store and felt he has earned his place to go there. The store visits were still the opposite of ordinary, but instead of feeling anxious he felt more comfortable than ever with the brand.

*“During the first visits before I bought the first one [=watch], it kind of felt like whether I can go to the store to hang around and kick tires so to say. It was sort of exciting and fun, but I kind of had the feeling whether I can be here. But after buying the first one I had in a way earned my place or something. After that I haven’t thought about it anymore.”*

From many stories it was distinctly found that the emotional connection with the brand took a step forward after purchase, as the brand had a higher personal meaning for the interviewees. Especially in luxury goods the participants described how the product represented something more for them e.g. a reward for an accomplishment, and how their feelings strengthened after there was also a symbolic dimension in the relationship.

*“Somehow the brand just gained strength from it, when I had the experience about it. The first clock was kind of a milestone in life. That I’ve graduated and now I have a job and I have acquired this Omega watch. And then I maybe even more actively started reading news regarding the brand and following them in different medias. In a way it cemented the relationship.”*

*“So, I thought it was like this weekday luxury for myself, that I want to reward myself for some achieving some accomplishment or specific milestone.”*

An interesting outlook on leveraging the connection with a brand into benefitting oneself on a more concrete level and seeing the brand experience as a possibility to invest into oneself emerged from the narratives. One interviewee told how the brand can serve him also on a self-developmental level and thus, have a higher meaning that through a personal value can enhance the emotional bond.

*“I don’t know if I’m just that kind of person who doesn’t like to skimp, but if I want something, I also see it as an investment on myself. That I do this trip or use these services.”*

It emerged that consumers do not only run into meaningful experiences – they also know how to look for them and are willing to invest in them. One of the interviewees told that for a long time he had wanted to get to stay in this hotel in his home town. Not because he just wanted to have a hotel night in some hotel, but to get the experience from this specific luxury hotel in question.

*“I knew that it will cost a lot and even I was living in Stockholm myself, I wanted to have like a once in a lifetime experience. Even if it will cost me. To get to somewhere like that [=top-class hotel], I don’t know can I put a price on it.”*

Interpersonal encounters and small polite gestures were highlighted in many of the interviewees’ stories. In the narratives a high-quality customer service and an overall welcoming ambience of the touch point was experienced as important elements in enhancing the emotional bond with the brand. Additionally, the participants cherished the feeling that the brand cares for them and is there for them when needed.

*“When I booked it, they sent me a very warm, maybe Swedish style, message from their customer service saying that hey you have booked and welcome. I’m not sure if it even said Sir or something even I’m a young guy going there. But it was nice and shows that they are really doing it with piety.”*

*“When compared to e.g. H&M, when I went to their store it was very personal. They come and help you and ask what you are looking for. They are with you and present in the situation that what are you after there.”*

On the contrary, also third parties were found to have a positive impact on the evolvement of the relationship in the narratives. Power or recommendations and word-of-mouth was a substantial element creating meaningful touch points between consumers and brands as consumers are more connected with each other than ever. Additionally, outsiders’ influence can be very profound even though they would not have any direct contact with the consumer. One of the interviewee’s told about his experience in a hotel breakfast, that took his experience into a whole new level and raised his positive emotions towards the brand notably.

*“Some kind of boost was given when I was there eating breakfast and some were also having brunch there, and then not the crown princess but Carl Philip’s wife with their party came there. And I was like wow, there are royals here. So that somehow gave a nice addition to the experience.”*

Many perceived relationships with brands who had been recommended to them by family and friends stronger and more durable, when compared to brands that had been found by recommendations from e.g. salespersons. The participants brought up in their stories that recommendations from trusted people are meaningful also with brands they had never owned personally. Interestingly, the chain of recommendations was not limited to one but goes further – one interviewee described he was influenced by friends' references even they had also no personal experience about the brand through ownership.

*“My friends have always praised it even not all of them have even owned them [=Genelec products].”*

Also, the small details appeared to have a great meaning for the participants. One of the interviewees told about his relationship journey with an outdoor sports brand Salomon and he had experienced a great development in trusting and loving the brand as it had continuously delivered and even exceeded his expectations.

*“If anyone would've not done those things so well, I wouldn't know to miss it and it's not a deal breaker, but at the same time it is still extra.”*

### 5.1.2 Love at first sight

A very interesting group of journeys was ascending from the narratives: in which the emotional connection with the brand rose suddenly and unexpectedly. In many of the cases the interviewees told they have had no relationship with the brand before the change-making encounter or the relationship had been even in a more negative state.

The interviewees found experiences as a powerful starting point for the consumer-brand relationship and it emerged that even a single experience can change everything and build the emotional connection. One of the interviewees described her experience with an airline TAP Portugal. She had booked a Finnair flight, but the flight was operated by another airline and she had very suspicious pre-assumptions about the brand. But as her expectations were highly exceeded and the experience was extremely positive, she told she would today definitely choose that airline again.

*“I was traveling alone with my husband without our kids and they gave us a free upgrade to business class. So, we both got three seats to ourselves and free food from real plates and such. So that was a very pleasant surprise.”*

When the interviewees had gotten to experience something that is not ordinary for them, they described feelings of being special and taken into account rising. One of the interviewees told about her special experience during her NYC visit as a young girl. After the experience all her bags have been from Coach.

*“I didn’t even know the brand before we went there. I had a full Sex and the City feeling as there were five women all helping us. It was something I had never experienced before. So that made me feel very luxurious and wow, even though I’m not rich or anything they still help me here.”*

One interviewee described her journey with a clothing brand Loavies. She had seen an influencer wearing a jacket she really fell for on Instagram and she found out what the brand was, but the jacket was not available in the brand’s online store any longer. She had taken a long shot and sent them a direct message on Instagram if they would still happen to have the jacket available. They replied that they had one piece just her size and they placed it available for her to go and buy it from the online store.

*“I thought it was just an amazing experience. I would have never thought anything like that and it’s not any small boutique.”*

As nowhere near all touchpoints are under the brand’s control, it was natural that in the narratives the experiences generated by third parties were experienced to have an impact on the consumer-brand relationship. One of the interviewees told about his memorable experience abroad, where the most powerful experience was executed by a liftman. The interviewee is a watch enthusiast who has never owned anything from the brand but after the encounter in NYC he felt he had a strong relationship with it.

*“I went to the elevator and there was a liftman waiting who asked Sir, where are you going? I answered, to the Patek Philippe lounge, and he said, Excellent choice Sir.”*

*“It created a feeling that wow, you’re getting great service here. There was like a really special feeling for some reason.”*

In some cases, meaningful experiences had managed to build the relationship with the brand into a long lasting one in long-term, even if the consumer has never actually used or owned the product themselves. Within the interviewees many of these brands were more high-end or premium priced products such as cars or luxury goods that are not that easily accessible.

*“After this experience I had there, which is partly only about the liftman’s Excellent choice Sir comment, is Patek Philip for me such that if I would ever afford it, I would definitely like to get that kind of watch for myself.”*

One of the participants told about the first time he had flown with Qatar Airways. Already prior the flight he had an image that everything works, but his experience was so powerful that the relationship was in his words strengthened and it would now require quite a big crisis for the relationship to change anymore. What he emphasized in his narrative was the human approach and the atmosphere – that he felt comfortable with the brand right from the beginning.

*“Overall the whole customer service, the food and the atmosphere there was when being greeted. It all just reasserted the really easily approachable and warm welcome.”*

One of the intriguing findings emerging from the narratives was the emphasis on feeling special and being connected with something unique, instead of sharing the partner with everyone. When the relationship was established, the interviewees highlighted how it was important for them that the brand is unique, and the purchase gives them access to an exclusive circle.

*“It is not as common as Louis Vuitton that everyone has. So, I think that’s important and also that you can’t buy it everywhere.”*

*“I think it’s amazing that if you have visited once in a same place, I don’t know if they train their employees into it somehow, but they remember you by name already before going to the counter and giving any papers about who you are. And then you get Christmas and birthday cards. So those are maybe things that have stayed in my mind the most.”*

Also, when compared to brand-owned advertisement and marketing efforts, the interviewees emphasized the power of recommendations from their circle of acquaintances. The interviewees described trusting the opinions and recommendations of her close ones significantly and making purchase choices based on them. In terms of recommendations the interviewees often heard about the brands for the first time when getting the tip and fell for the product right away.

*“It is very important if I get recommendations from my circle of acquaintances and get concrete tips that something is good. So, I’ll try it. If I think about some commercials I don’t care that much when compared to hearing that something actually works.”*

The interviewees in their narratives described not only being influenced by recommendations or examples by brand advocates, they were themselves also eager to share their experiences and give recommendations of brands they care about. It emerged from the interviews that the participants were more likely to operate as voluntary brand ambassadors when they had an emotional connection with the brand. The interviewees described that they recommend their favorite brands happily and thus, they are operating in a two-way relationship with a brand and giving back something in return for good products or experiences.

*“I happily recommend these places to others as well.”*



### 5.1.3 Growing to love

The narratives categorized in *growing to love* represent journeys where the beginning of the relationship had not been particularly rosy. In some cases, the brand had not at first been special in any way for the interviewee or they have even attached negative emotions to it. However, along the journey the relationship between the interviewee and brand had evolved slowly and at the time of the interviews the participants found they had a strong positive attachment for the brand today.

It emerged that when a brand manages to stay up to date and fit the current day, the consumers might give it a chance for new kinds of relationships to build up. One interviewee described she had in her childhood had a relationship with Marimekko since they always had Marimekko products in their home, but her relationship with the brand was negative and she had experienced it even as embarrassing. Today, she follows Marimekko actively on social media and has learnt to think highly of their design and is proud of the brand.

*“Have I changed or have they [=brand] changed? I guess both.”*

One of the interviewees had a very special experience about Adidas as she had worked there a while ago and she had found that her values matched perfectly with the brand in terms of e.g. sustainability and encouraging to avoid single-use culture. Despite the Adidas a massive global brand, had the interviewee’s relationship grown so much that he had become a brand ambassador that connects personally with the brand at grass roots level.

*“I feel now that in the end it’s a small German family company – even though it’s a multinational brand and everything. But now it feels mine and it feels homey and I feel pride whenever I see them succeeding.”*

It emerged from the narratives that cognitive aspects were used as grounds for the emotional connection to build up and strengthen in terms of e.g. brand becoming loyal and trusted in the eyes of the interviewees. One of the interviewees told he did not really care before which sportswear he bought, but today he almost completely buys and uses Nike’s products as

everything he has bought has been out of great quality and he knows already beforehand that the products will deliver.

*“Before I didn’t really care what I bought, but now if I go to a store, I first look what is in Nike’s selection before I look at anything else or even ignore everything else.”*

Similarly with human-to-human encounters, the true nature of the other party might reveal itself only after a while. One of the interviewees told about his experiences with a barbershop. He had ended up trying the brand through a friend’s recommendation but did not find the place special in the beginning. The relationship changed after he started noticing that the brand genuinely makes efforts in taking him into account. To some extent, he described he even recognized that the acts of being taken into account or being familiar were artificial as the brand does not actually just remember it, but it is written down, he still valued it highly and perceived it as a significant factor in their relationship.

*“There I like that feeling I get when they kind of remember you even though it is actually based on only on that they have written it down once and are reading from that. It makes me feel that I am a special customer for them. So that feeling is nice.”*

The importance of the brand being an active party in the relationship and taking the consumer into account was highly noticeable from the interviewee’s stories. The interviewees described different kinds of situations and experiences that made the brand important to them, as they feel that the brand cares about them and knows them personally – instead of just offering a universal experience for everyone. Similarly, when discussing about human-to-human interactions. One of the interviewees told about her journey with the gym chain Elixia. In the beginning she had not even considered of being a member of such a large gym, but as she gave them a chance, they really impressed her.

*“It’s kind of similar to with people. When you meet new people and with some you just get the feeling that there is something good about them. When you feel good in their company you want to kinda cherish it.”*

## 5.2 Lasting relationship

Under the umbrella of lasting relationships, two different categories of relationship journeys were identified. Narratives under *trusted partner* category represent journeys that have been long time-wise and placid by nature, meaning that the interviewees described these relationships as quite fundamental for them and did not question the state of the relationship. Instead, journeys described in the category of *through thick and thin* narratives are also from a long time period but have been noticeably more volatile and responsive for changes. Yet, these relationships have despite of it remained strong and durable.

### 5.2.1 Trusted partner

In many of the narratives the interviewees chose to bring up brands they have had a seemingly steady connection throughout the relationship without any particular ups or downs. These journeys included stories about brands the interviewees trusted and saw as so-called steady life companions.

When a more personal relationship with the brand was experienced according to the narratives, the interviewee's emotional connection levels raised. These positive situations led to feelings of being important, having a more personal and genuine relationship, and being acknowledged.

*“Everything works smoothly. When I go to the bank and I know everyone I don't even need to show my ID and so on, so that's fun. Everyone knows me, it's a small bank. I can personally mail to someone if I want to, which is a nice addition.”*

One of the most profound elements characterizing the strong emotional relationship with brands among the participants' narratives was the influence of family's habits stemming all the way from childhood. Brands that e.g. interviewees' mothers had used in their routines were now part of their own routines and the brand was still today part of the interviewees' lives as a so-called family heritage.

*“I have probably taken a lot of routines, brands and products by copying my mother when I was young.”*

*“I feel that the brands that have been present in my childhood home, they make me feel like home when buying those same things.”*

*“My father has always had a Ford, and so my first car and also the following cars have been Fords and probably will be in the future too.”*

It emerged from the stories that the relationship with brands lived along with the personal development of the interviewees and some of the brands, especially agile ones, have had the ability to become life companions for the consumers. If both parties, the consumer and the brand, have evolved in a same pace and direction, the consumers still today had a brand that reflects things important for them to go back to. In several narratives brands were used as a medium to serve a higher purpose and to communicate personal values, which means the brand's values has to reflect the consumers' values. One interviewee told she had been a customer of a fast-fashion brand H&M since she was young, but the brand no longer resonated with her values at present. As H&M group has several sub-brands, she had another brand to turn to in the present day. The relationship quality was not any more today dependable on the interviewee's preferences on e.g. price or purchase frequency but having an impact on a more societal level and having the brand as a partner for making the interviewee a better person through her consumption choices.

*“Nowadays when I'm in a store I think what I actually need and what kind of person I want to be.”*

*“I try to take small actions in order to make to world a little better in some way.”*

Another interviewee held the brand values as one of the key factors influencing on with which brands she chooses to interact and have a relationship with. As she has the power as a consumer to support activities that are matching her values, she chooses not to use any products that are conflicting with them.

*“I prefer using and consuming products that have similar values with me vs. it being somehow conflicted with my personal values”*

Shared qualities with brands could be highlighted in several interviews as the interviewees tended to favor brands they had similarities with such as in terms of values, origins or ideologies. Especially characteristics related to environmental friendliness and Finnish roots were relevant for the interviewees when assessing their emotional connections with brands.

*“I find it responsible and they are highlighting entrepreneurship and also Finnish origins and Finnish entrepreneurship as they are a Finnish company. The entrepreneurs themselves are highly profiled in their story.”*

The interviewees seemed not to connect and build relationships with just any brands. In the narratives more neutral relationships were established with numerous brands, but genuine and long-lasting relationships were built only with certain chosen brands. A trait that was discoverable from the interviews was the will to connect with brands on an emotional level. The interviewees in many cases did not only want the brand to serve them with the practical purpose (e.g. feeding them or giving them a place to sleep), but to enrich their lives also on a more profound level.

*“I strongly feel I need to have some kind of connection to it if I use some product or service. So, I want to, and I clearly do form some emotional connection to it.”*

In many interviews it was also notable that it is not only important that the brand cares for the consumer, but also that it cares for others. The interviewees described environmental factors, sustainable development and transparency being highly sought-after attributes in a brand shaping the emotional connection they have with brands.

*“Not only that they bring out what they are doing, they are also communicating a lot to the consumers about the roots of their products and where are they coming from.”*

*“They appreciate also the original producer in the production chain, and they are striving to create good chances for them too to carry on their business with fair compensations and such.”*

It was possible to spot from the narratives that when the relationship is established and is durable by nature, the participants felt the relationship can also develop a characteristic of non-elasticity. That is, that both peak emotional development as well as steep downfalls become milder. In their stories the interviewees became forgiving and overlooked some of the shortages of the brand whereas also positive encounters' effect on the relationship remains sedate.

*“Even if a brand would be under some sensation, I think it wouldn't change the basic tone and no radical change wouldn't happen. And on the other hand, a successful ad from e.g. Nike will not take it to the next level.”*

*“Whether it's a positive or negative commercial or information, the idea [=of the brand] changes quite slowly.”*

Trusted partners were highlighted in the narratives also in terms of experiences in which the interviewee needed the brand to support them and provide comfort and safety. When these emotions were unquestionable, the interviewees felt the brand was their trusted partner and looked after them. One of the interviewees told she had been on some sketchy flight in Asia and she remembered herself thinking:

*“If I'll survive from all of these [=Asian airlines' flights], when I'm sitting on a Finnair airplane, I'll know already I've made it back home.”*

Despite a majority of the touch points the interviewees described in their narratives were not about direct commercials, high-quality advertisement was still appreciated and acknowledged by some of the interviewees, especially among younger consumers. In these cases, social media channels and advertisement pieces done with effort and care were mentioned as touch points meaningful for the interviewees.

*“Those great commercials and YouTube videos only add interest and appreciation towards it [=Nike] even though it wasn't maybe targeted to me.”*

### 5.2.2 Through thick and thin

A characteristic many participants raised in their narratives with brands they have had a long relationship, was the volatile nature of the connection. The category *through thick and thin* includes journeys, where the consumer-brand relationship is so established, that also concessions were being made when things go wrong. Similarly to human-to-human relationships, emotions towards another person varies along time, but in the end the relationship is still so important that people are willing to forgive some of the shortcomings of the other party. Despite interviewees saw their strong relationships with brands as quite resistant, some key features were identified that can temporarily rock the connection. Still, due to the tolerant characteristics of a strong consumer-brand bond, the relationships bounced well back into the original state or even strengthened after the occasion. It was notable, that when the interviewee had not traits of an especially strong emotional connection, these qualities were easily enough to end the whole relationship.

In terms of majority of the stories the interviewees told, it emerged that one of the key traits keeping their relationship strong and positive with brands was forgiveness. When the interviewees described their journeys with brands they had a seemingly strong relationship with, they were noticeably more compliant with encountering problems or negative experiences or information. Even though participants emphasized the importance of having shared values with the brand, they were willing to make quite notable concessions when the relationship with the brand was already established a long time ago and evolved into a particularly strong one. The interviewees were willing to bend their own rules with even quite fundamental values such as ethicality or environmental ecology. For instance, one of the interviewees described sustainability and natural materials being one of the most important things she nowadays values in brands and uses brands that support those principles. As it came to some brands she had a very long-term close relationship stemming all the way from her childhood, she was noticeably more forgiving.

*“I guess they don’t do animal testing and I guess some of them [=products] are natural, but they are not quite exemplary or fully natural cosmetics.”*

Some interviewees were very price conscious in terms of many brands, but when it came to brands they had a special attachment to, they were willing to be flexible on their principles.

*“So, my feelings are very mixed these days. I would like to use it [=iPhone] still as it has been a really good product, but then I have the feeling that how can I buy a new one as the price just keeps on rising.”*

Recommendations from both family and friends, as well as external channels such as social media influencers were mentioned recurrently in the participants' stories. Some of the participants did not express any reservations towards either of the parties, whereas some were to some extent skeptical towards the external recommendations even though they were one of their primary information sources.

*“They use a lot of this influencer marketing or I think it is fully based on using influencers and I have a feeling that are they [=influencers] telling the truth.”*

The interviewees described in their narratives that they had experienced feelings of confusion when they heard differing opinions and experiences about the brand, which made them question what actually the truth is.

*“They [=products] are hyped so much or those specific people are hyping, so when I hear these negative experiences it makes me feel that is this true what all these people [=influencers] are saying.”*

*“I feel that many brands are being hyped a lot, but there is still nothing special about them. So, it's really hard to know.”*

Interestingly, it also emerged from the stories how the interviewees were affected when it emerged the brand was not fully who they thought it was and the established trust was tried.

*“From somewhere I found out that Hugo Boss, who has founded the company like in the 1930s or 1940s, has been clothing the Nazi SS troops and officers. That was for me that wow I really didn't know that and so it created a small stain into it.”*



In some cases, the interviewees expected a brand to be e.g. very exquisite and providing something extra that is not elsewhere available. If then the experience surprised with its exclusive nature, it in some narratives felt so intimidating that it actually did more harm than good.

*“There was a man by the door dressed up in suit and had a tray with champagne glasses who greeted me Monsieur. So as a Finn it took my guard up and I was like wow, what is this. We had a short conversation about it where I asked is there any special reason to drink champagne at this hour and the man responded that not yet, but there might be. It gave me a feeling that damn if I take the glass, I have to buy something. So, there it kind of worked against itself.”*

Naturally, as the brands discussed were close to the interviewees’ hearts, the narratives in this category had also many positive touch points and meanings. The interaction with the brand and owning their products has also value in terms redeeming a place to be a part of something more special. One of the interviewees described how getting to part of the brand’s story makes him happy.

*“If I buy a premium product, and it doesn’t even have to be, but when buying something I consider as an investment, I get to part of that premium story when I have it myself.”*

### 5.3 Weakened relationship

In terms of weakened relationship spans, two categories were identified from the narratives. The category of *fading love* includes relationship journeys, where the emotional connection with the brand slowly within time has descended, whereas the category of *sudden fall* contains journeys where an acute event has managed to change the relationship so dramatically, that it has basically ended right away.

#### 5.3.1 Fading love

An interesting set of narratives emerged from the interviews in terms of downward relationships, where the relationship had once been in a very strong state and the emotional

connection had been powerful, but over time and through lived experiences the connection had changed its course and started fading away.

The weight of experiences over products was emphasized in several narratives especially in terms of lifestyle and luxury items, whereas the same phenomena was not occurring that much within the relationships to brands offering consumable basic products. The interviewees found that customer experiences had the ability to take the relationship into a whole new level and even revoke some earlier attitudes and feelings. Thus, the connection with brands leaning strongly to owning the product was in some cases taking a negative turn.

*“I have maybe begun to lean more towards experiences – I’ll rather go on a holiday than buy something. I don’t get the same feeling from material possessions anymore.”*

Even though the focus is on consumer-brand relationships, just like in interpersonal relationships also events outside the two relationship parties that can have an effect on the quality and state of the relationship were identified from the narratives. The interviewees described experiences and information from close ones and media shaping their relationships with brands.

One interviewee had dreamt of a luxury bag for a long time and saved the money for it by herself, but when the time came to go and buy the bag, she had unfortunate events with her family leading them to diminish the whole experience of buying the bag she had dreamt of for so long.

*“Somehow there is not really positive feelings attached to buying the bag, as the whole day itself was so bad. I maybe remember more of those bad feelings from that day than the good one that I bought the bag.”*

A characteristic framing many of the relationships the interviewees described was a feeling of uniqueness – that the brand was there for them exclusively to some extent and not so many people had either access to it or knowledge about it. Problems in the relationship started to arise when the participants felt they had to share the brand with too many others.

*“Louis Vuitton as a brand has at least in my eyes deteriorated and I don’t experience it as something I would pay as much for anymore as everyone else have it too. It is somehow not as special anymore even though it has been of great quality.”*

*“The point of paying a lot money is that they are unique and not everyone has them. It is like a thing that you can buy it, that you are a part of the smaller group who has it. But it doesn’t feel like that anymore, it’s not special any longer.”*

Also, when a brand can be used as a medium for differentiating oneself from others and having somethings others don’t, it has a positive effect on the consumer-brand relationship.

*“I was also somehow very compelled by the fact that the phone wasn’t available in Finland. So, it was launched first in Germany and somewhere else in Central Europe. And that caused the reaction in me that I just had to have it.”*

However, even if the relationship had started off by being means to feeling special, the feeling was not eternal. In some cases, even there had not been any crisis with the brand and the brand had been a good relationship partner, the relationship faded as the brand could not keep up with its rivals. One interviewee described how he’s excitement died due to the better choices available.

*“Because of the services third parties offered – not because of Nokia. I still liked Nokia. I was kind of a brand ambassador and I was proud of Nokia phone.”*

Also, feelings of discomfort and anxiety as the brand’s environment felt intimidating were elements the interviewees emphasized in their stories. This was interesting, as with brands the relationship was on an upbeat, it was notable how much the interviewees appreciated feeling comfortable and valued by the brand.

*“I have maybe a feeling that are they thinking that I just come here to hang around and I can’t actually afford anything.”*

*“It [=store] is maybe a little intimidating as a place, as everything is so expensive, and I feel that are they watching me here when I’m looking around that I don’t steal anything.”*

### 5.3.2 Sudden fall

In some of the narratives, the relationship had taken a noteworthy turn towards negative state suddenly and unexpectedly. The sudden fall was experienced when the narrative included an event so meaningful for the interviewee, that it was not anymore possible, nor they were willing to look away. Some of the relationships had been particularly strong but had undergone so severe events that the feelings had more suddenly faded into a more negative state. On the contrary, more shallow relationship with a brand ended with far more lighter grounds leading to instant goodbyes and were not in some cases able to get over even from minor setbacks.

Problems were encountered when the brand was close to the interviewee, but it was then discovered that the brand was not who they thought it was. One interviewee described her feelings after she had discovered, that a textile company Finlayson was not manufacturing their products in Finland. This made her question the brand and she said she is nowadays also considering more whether to buy from Finlayson or somewhere else.

*“When I woke up to the fact that they [=products] are made completely elsewhere and the explanation was that it costs so much to make them here in Finland. And they aren’t cheap currently either. So that was an experience that gave me a strong feeling that not everything is like you thought it would be.”*

It emerged from the narratives that it is possible that when consumers have a strong relationship with a brand that naturally includes also certain feelings and associations, consumers have taken in some promises from the brand what kind of brand it really is. When this promise and perception is being shaken, is also the relationship with a brand under scrutiny and trust under trial. It emerged from the interviews that if the relationship is strong, is the overall trust more solid, but still liable for reverses.

*“I think that wow how cool things, but then when I hear from the inside how things actually are, I feel they are kinda colliding.”*

*“I think it is not open marketing, they are somewhere high up that in reality is not the truth at all.”*

Especially in cases where the relationship was not particularly strong, the ups and downs with the brand were noticeably steeper when compared to brands with whom they had a high-quality relationship. Especially in cases of failing to meet the expectations leading to feelings of disappointment, the interviewees described very intensive emotional let-downs and were questioning was the brand as good as their word also in the long term. It was also noticeable that even when recovering from the disappointment, the next disappointment again took the relationship into strongly negative state.

*“We were with the attitude that it’s not probably even today reliable and is late for sure. But everything went well, and we got to the destination. So, we’re there and planning to book another holiday from the same travel agency as everything went so well. But then our return flight was delayed 32 hours and now our trust is back to zero.”*

Events of extensive societal level have their impact on consumer-brand relationships. Commonly disapproved events and major crisis related to larger events than just the brand, influenced indirectly also to the consumer-brand relationships.

*“If there would break out some kind of crisis or wat in the area, it would probably affect me so that I wouldn’t want to use it anymore. So, it would require quite a substantial threshold for me for it [=relationship with the brand] to change I think.”*

It emerged from the interviews that several brands are easily replaceable as the relationship is not very strong, and from these brands consumers have no problem switching away from. The negative experience does not even have to be from a personal perspective, but even a third-party opinion can cause the trade-off. Instead, when the relationship is on more solid grounds, it is not so easily influenced by external factors.

*“I feel that I can change quite easily. If there is something I hear negative from, I can easily try new. But if I have used something for a long time, then I maybe contemplate myself is it bad just from someone’s perspective or is it bad for myself as well.”*

## 6 DISCUSSION

In this chapter the key results emerged from the study through the data analysis will be reflected to the existing literature. The current study provides viewpoints and insights on consumers' emotional relationships with brands and addresses the emotional connection's fundamentality in the consumer-brand relationship.

This study offers insights on how consumers construe their emotional connection with a brand evolves through the experiences over time along the customer journey. It deepens the existing knowledge of consumers' subjective understanding about their emotional journeys with brands and provides novel viewpoints on the topic area that has not received a lot of academic attention. Consumers' emotional connections with brands are an emerging research field, and this study contributes by showcasing journeys and experiences consumers find meaningful. Therefore, this study provides many contributions to both theory and practice.

As presented previously, all together seven categories of relationship journeys were identified across the data set that represent *strengthened*, *lasting* and *weakened* relationship journeys. The narratives collected show support to Fournier's (1998) notion that relationship is long-term construct including affective, behavioural and conscious bonds, and the diverse set of journey categories identified is a novel spin-off to Fournier's research on consumers and their brand relationships. Via the narratives these categories give a voice to today's Finnish consumers and a new type of review into how consumers comprehend and process their relationships with brands. While the journeys were versatile and rather unique when compared to each other, a shared characteristic between the journeys was their course – the emotional consumer-brand connection is not built or vanished overnight, but the journey moves along gradually (Levy & Hino, 2016) and is not a static construct (Fournier, 1998).

One of the most explicitly emerging themes reflecting the existing theory was the human-like nature of the consumer-brand relationships identified from the narratives. The interviewees emphasized through their narratives that they want and seek the relationship to be a two-way street, instead of just a lifeless transaction. In many stories brands and their representatives played the role of an active partner in the relationship and not just a passive

purchase-target (Fournier, 1998). The interviewees in their stories both attached human characteristics to brands (e.g. Foodin is an honest brand), as well as anthropomorphized the brands and attached actual human manners to them (e.g. Finnair wants to take me home safe) (Alvarez & Fournier, 2016). When the interviewees created perceptions about the brand's personality, they formed associations about the brand's human-like characteristics (Fournier, 1998), which in turn made it possible for them to also be let down and disappointed by the brand followed by a weakened relationship. Thus, similarly to human-to-human relationships when you put yourself out there, you are taking a certain chance to gain or lose more.

According to Grewal et al. (2017) if customers can identify themselves with the values of the brand, the emotional connections can be strengthened. A trait many of the narratives shared was to have the brand as a relationship partner that reflects either themselves or the idea of a person they would like to be. As Swaminathan et al. (2009) stated, consumers leverage brands to communicate their positive characteristics and qualities to other people and this was notable especially within narratives concerning luxury goods and building e.g. status as well as narratives where environmental concerns in order to be a better person overall were featured. Still, the highest peaks in the development of the emotional connection (love at first sight) were with brands the interviewees perceived one-of-a-kind and that made them feel excited and surprised (Swaminathan et al., 2009; Smit et al., 2007). Thus, like Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) described, a customer becomes more likely an advocate for the company when he can identify himself with it and it is interesting that only today the companies understanding this statement have been appearing more and more. Also, in other cases when the brand managed to create more profound feelings such as trust and joy over purely rational reasoning (Berry, 2000), the customer felt more attached to the brand and was more likely to recommended to others too. This was noticeable as several interviewees described in their narratives how they endorse a brand more likely after a positive encounter and bonding with the retailer and in some cases be even be more forgiving to the brand. Consequently, it can be stated that customer is sharing when caring, i.e. being a volunteer champion for the products and services that she is connected on a more meaningful level. Naturally, it is notable that e.g. digitalization has had its influence on customers being connected and being able to share their experiences around the world with a push of a button, but yet many brands have not harnessed this change and opportunity.



As characteristic for the relationship between a brand and a customer is that the emotional connection is gained through time (Levy & Hino, 2015) and in order for the connection between to be long-lasting, the connection has to go beyond just positive emotions and be built also on the foundations of other dimensions such as behavioral ties (Fournier, 1998). When the relationship with the brand is built in time and especially other people in the consumer's life are involved in the process too, the brand can be seen as a life companion. The same traits as with a trusted friend were identified in the relationship between a consumer and a brand through the data analysis. Thus, the brand is interacting with the consumer through its brand personality where human-like characteristics such as trust are being perceived by the consumer (Fournier, 1998). When taking this back to Maslow's (1943) theory on basic needs, a brand that is responding to the basic human needs of e.g. love and esteem is getting "under the skin" of the consumer and strengthening the bond. This way the customer is committed to stay with the brand despite the variety of perceived negativities in the customer experience from time to time. The phenomenon is interesting as many of us have an access to products and services around the world real time via online stores and changing from one service to another is easy, but still it is relevant for the consumers to also have brands with them "for life".

According to Berry (2000, p. 134) the "feelings of closeness, affection and trust" are a sign of an extraordinary brand, and this is something brands in the content filled business scene should register. One of the timely ways to consumers' radars and hearts is to resonate with them on a more profound level and make an impression they do not only notice but feel as well. As described by the interviewee who had encountered the liftman in New York and heard the words "Excellent choice, Sir", the emphasis was on the emotion-evoking experience, that had overcome the importance of the actual product itself (Morrison & Crane, 2007). This highlights the importance of providing meaningful experiences as especially between brick-and-mortar retailers the distinction between competitors is done by providing a high-quality customer experience (Alexander, Teller, & Roggerveen, 2016). In this case as well it was all about connecting on a personal level and leaving an emotional mark through a touch point in the form of experience. It was interesting, that in the mind of the customer the importance of the touch point was formed through a one sentence a liftman said which ultimately led the way of the whole customer journey. It is notable that customers do not just remember what brand said and communicated to them, but also how the customer interpreted it and in to large extent they remember the feeling the brand left.

## 7 CONCLUSIONS

In this concluding chapter the research is summarized and the findings, and managerial implications are being addressed. Additionally, the limitations of the study are discussed and suggestions for further research are presented.

### 7.1 Research summary

This study focused on emotional aspects of consumer-brand relationships through a narrative method. The aspects of consumer-brand relationships have been in the area of interest for a while but have recently gained an emerging amount of attention in the marketing domain. The topic is relevant as today's retail environment is in the middle of a big change due to digitalization, globalization, new technologies, and change in the behavioral models of people and as Marketing Science Institution (2016, p. 10) stated along with Grewal et al. (2017), "the role of emotions in experience" is one of the key themes waiting to be discussed in the upcoming years.

The main purpose of this research was to seek viewpoints to the question "*What kind of narratives consumers use to describe their emotional relationship journeys with brands?*" In order to seek understanding for the question, a widespread and diligent literature review was implemented. The directional idea behind the research was Fournier's (1998) outlook on consumer-brand relationships and their human-like characteristics, which offered fruitful foundations for this narrative study. All together seven types of narrative journeys were identified: (1) Taking it slow, (2) Love at first sight, (3) Growing to love, (4) Trusted partner, (5) Through thick and thin, (6) Fading love, and (7) Sudden fall.

The research managed to conduct new contributions to the academic field and strengthen the understanding of emotional connections in consumer-brand relationships. Previous research on the topic area has focused more on exploring and conceptualizing different relationship types (Fournier, 1998; Aggarwal, 2004; Batra et al., 2012), measuring the relationship (Thomson, MacInnis, & Park, 2005), and studying the effect of the relationship to consumer behaviors (Esch, Langner, Schmitt, & Geus, 2006). However, emotional consumer-brand connection variance through touch points along the customer journey has hardly received

attention and the findings of the study shed light on this important domain. The relationship journeys identified through unique narrative interview data are novel by nature and provide an interesting outlook on consumers' subjective understanding of the evolvement of their emotional connections with brands and meaningful experiences shaping those relationships along the journey.

In line with previous studies, the narratives in this research showed support of the reciprocal partnership characteristic where both consumers and brands are seen as active members in the relationship (Fournier, 1998; Aggarwal, 2004; Hwang & Kandampully, 2012) and that relationships between consumers and brands can have wide resemblances to human-to-human relationships as consumers can see and identify with brands similarly to other people (Fournier, 1998; Aggarwal & McGill, 2012; Park et al., 2013; Alvarez & Fournier, 2016). Nevertheless, an interesting notion ascending from the narratives was that even though consumer-brand relationships have many parallels with human-to-human relationships that in general rest on authenticity, the interviewees still found brands' deliberate and somewhat artificial positive acts of taking them into account desirable and as elements enhancing the relationship.

Following Chaplin and John (2005) and Sprott, Czellar, and Spangenberg (2009), the narratives of the study indicated that consumers exploit brands for personal objectives such as self-express. However, while Hwang and Kandampully (2012) noted that emotional features in consumer-brand relationship can more extensively be found within hedonic goods, the narratives of this study suggest that consumers themselves may not find differences between utilitarian and hedonic brands when it comes to the emotional dimension in their consumer-brand relationships. The narratives also complement Joireman, Grégoire, and Tripp's (2016) notion on strong-relationship consumers being more willing to forgive the brand and the findings underscore the impact of relationship strength to consumers' processing and reactions to failures.

In conclusion, customers' hearts are hard to win, but when they discover human-like characteristics in brands and something they can identify themselves with, a genuine opportunity for creating a one-of-a-kind emotional connection can be established. Importantly, when the emotional connection is perceived, it might uplift the relationship and

make consumers the trusted partners, that stay true to the brand despite some shortcomings in the experiences along the journey. Notably, many perceived it crucial that the brand is also giving something more in return, not only the promised goods as a part of a tradeoff.

## 7.2 Practical implications

This research provides a unique review into how consumers discern their relationship development with brands in time and a glimpse to the assumptions consumers have about the experiences shaping their emotional consumer-brand connections. Primarily, the study illustrates the subjective meanings consumers attach to their experiences and how they in practice adapt their relationships on the grounds of these encounters. The importance of customer perspective on the consumer-brand relationship is highlighted, as consumers distinctively structure their relationships with brands through touch points.

While being meaningful for today's consumers in the content crowded society is a challenge to overcome, managers should acknowledge the meaning of offering emotional experiences (Morrison & Crane, 2007) that lead the customer's journey to a desired direction. As consumers use brands as a medium to add meaning to their lives (Fournier, 1998), it is important and relevant for brands to gain access to their customers' life journeys and become a partner that helps with this mission. By ignoring the relevance of a strong consumer-brand relationship and an emotional level connection to consumers, brands risk staying relevant for their audiences. Additionally, having strong emotional relationships with consumers reflects in terms of lifetime value all the way to the bottom line (Zorfas & Leemon, 2016). Thus, connecting on a profound and more meaningful way with consumers should be on every up-to-date manager's agenda.

The findings of this study provide grounds and incentive for brands to establish and nurture long-lasting and strong relationships with their customers. As consumers perceive brands similarly with other people, brands should use this notion in making their presence in consumer encounters more relatable and human. Marketing managers can harness the findings to understanding their customers better and use them as guidance with the consumers' voices for strategy work utilizing sentimental aspects in customer relationship management. The findings highlight the importance of listening consumers and identify

some of the ways how consumers see their consumer-brand relationships developing, as they can differ greatly from what was originally intended from the brand's perspective. Therefore, recognizing consumers as active partners through co-creation and taking consumers along in designing meaningful and emotion-evoking touch points is an asset brands should enforce. Without understanding the thoughts and customs of consumers on experiences, standing out from the competition might become even more difficult in time. As showcased in the findings, consumers can find similar touch points in opposite ways and based on that a single encounter along their journeys can take completely distinct courses and by recognizing the phenomenon managers can turn it into a competitive asset and plan their touch points consciously.

The information gained from this study can be used in designing customer journeys to serve the sought-after result of the relationship development and as a source of inspiration for creating wonderful touch points along that journey to feed the positive growth of the relationship. As the narratives imply that customers expect brands being no less than a responsive and trustworthy partner, brands operating in the omni-channel environment where controlling and developing customer journeys is challenging (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016) have to put in extra effort to manage their customer experiences and live up to customers' expectations. As only part of the touch points identified from the narratives were under brands' direct control, managers can benefit from acknowledging that a single provided experience can lead to countless number of third-party encounters – in good or bad. The findings serve brands offering hedonic goods as well as brands focusing on functional goods, as the narratives offer viewpoint to journeys including both kinds of brands, but as the consumers in their narratives emphasized the weight of experiences over products, is this something that especially brands offering consumption goods should pay especially close attention to. However, is discovered from the narratives it is important to acknowledge that consumers do not acquire high-quality relationships with every brand (Thomson et al., 2005) and thus, the significance of creating relevant touch points and designing interesting journeys while keeping mind the customer as an individual is high.

### 7.3 Limitations and future research

As characteristic for qualitative studies, the purpose of the findings was to offer insights and bring new viewpoints to the research field, and gain access and more understanding on how

consumers construe their relationships with brands develops within time. Therefore, providing a generalizable theory was not an objective of the study and the contributions emerged should be reviewed as exploratory in nature. The results are applicable to other cases as well, but only with a case-specific consideration. As the research was executed as a narrative study, the results are open to various interpretations and represent the construction of the researcher.

The limitations of the study work as interesting themes for future empirical studies. First, the study was conducted by interviewing Scandinavian consumers, more precisely Finnish consumers living in the capital area of Finland. Thus, it offers a fertile area for further research that could focus on comparing consumers' perceptions at Europe-level or on other continents to the findings of this study. Second, although the scientific saturation point was reached with the informative participant group of 12 and apparent findings were validated, the sample offers only a limited access on the topic area. Future research is needed to address the influence of brands' field of business to the narratives about the consumer-brand relationship development. Also, would be interesting to study whether the perceptions about the influence of different touch points to the relationship in terms of e.g. domestic and foreign brands differ from each other. Especially as qualitative methods cannot be used to examine how broadly the categories and assumptions occur, in future studies this research could be further empirically elaborated by also using quantitative methods to gain a more diverse and in-depth understanding of the reality (McCracken, 1988). Finally, some external factors possibly effecting the results were not fully addressed. Due to the personal and sensitive nature of the topic the narratives some of the interviewees might be biased, despite efforts were made to manage the contingency.

To conclude, the evolution of the consumer-brand connection along the customer journey generates an interesting and diverse area of research. The topic offers many interesting possibilities for examination from different perspectives and this research can be reviewed as a starting point for upcoming narrative studies addressing how consumers structure their emotional consumer-brand relationship development through different touch points in other contexts.

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